

ICONS SPEAK: THEIR MESSAGE



Introducing the Twelve Great Feast Days of
Orthodox Christianity through the written
and the visual Gospel (the Bible and Icon)
emphasizing their meaning for us today

■ ANTHONY M. CONIARIS ■

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Anthony M. Coniaris

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FOREWORD

The great power of the icon is the power to *remind*.

The Holy Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council decreed, “The icons remind those who pray of the icons’ prototypes and, through gazing upon the icons, the believers lift up their minds from the images to the prototypes.”

This is why Orthodox Christians venerate icons—praying before them, lighting candles before them, kissing them, setting lamps before them, and censuring them. If icons were merely “artistic depictions,” all of this veneration would be criminal idolatry and sinfully absurd. Why? Because only God deserves such honor. Thus, the icons are venerated because, through their prayerful use, the believer ascends from image to proto-image (prototype).

As the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council wrote,

An icon remembers its prototype. Thus, in one beholder it will awaken in the bright clarities of his conscious mind a spiritual vision that matches directly the bright clarities of the icon; and the beholder’s vision will be comparably clear and conscious. But in another person, the icon will stir the dreams that lie deeper in the subconscious, awakening a perception of the spiritual that not only affirms that such seeing is possible but also brings the thing seen into immediately felt experience. Thus, at the highest flourishing of their prayer, the ancient ascetics found that their icons were not simply windows through which they could behold the holy countenances depicted on them but were also doorways through which these countenances actually entered the empirical world. The saints came down from the icons to appear before those praying to them.

These words express the purpose of this book: to make the great feast days of the Orthodox Church come alive through the study of the icon of each feast, together with its scriptural text. Almost all the icons in this book are biblical icons whose reality is grounded in the revealed word of God.

It has been said that in Orthodoxy the year is defined by feast days. For this reason, this book will study the great feasts of our Lord (and a few others) in order to better acquaint us with the basic tenets of our Orthodox faith. The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council said about the icon that “What the

word says, the image shows us silently; what we have heard we have seen.” A study of the scripture text combined with a prayerful study of the icon and the meaning of each feast will yield, by God’s grace, a feast for the eyes, the heart, and the soul. In this sense, all icons are miracle-working, and all can be windows and doors into eternity.

There are those who object that the second commandment (Ex. 20:4-6) prohibits all imagery. Yet in the holy of holies, God’s throne in Israel’s midst, the mercy seat had a cherub on each side. Moreover, the ark of the covenant in the holy of holies contained the relics (or icons) of Israel: the pot of manna, Aaron’s rod, and the tablets of the Law. After the Son of God became man (the Incarnation), the image or icon of Christ became in the East a confession of faith in the reality of the Incarnation, which Vladimir Lossky calls “the supreme theophany.”

It must be noted that iconoclasm (the movement to remove icons from Orthodox Churches) did not arise among theologians but was imposed on the people by the Byzantine emperor Leo Isaurus. He issued a decree in 726 A.D. forbidding the veneration of icons. Many notable Church leaders of the time came to the defense of icons. But the emperor declared himself “Caesar and High Priest” and chose to ignore the bishops. St. John of Damascus spoke out against imperial claims over the Church. He wrote, “We will obey you, O emperor, in those matters that pertain to our daily lives: payments, taxes, tributes...But as far as the government of the Church is concerned, we have our bishops and pastors who interpret the ordinances of the Church.”^[1]

The Feast Days of our Lord to be considered in this volume include:

1. The Anastasis (Resurrection)
2. The Falling Asleep of the Theotokos
3. The Pantocrator Christ
4. The Nativity
5. Icons of the Theotokos With Child (the Incarnation)
6. The Annunciation
7. The Transfiguration
8. The Raising of Lazarus
9. The Entry Into Jerusalem
10. The Ascension
11. The Hospitality of Abraham (Trinity)

12. The Crucifixion
13. The Descent of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost)
14. Theophany, the Baptism of Jesus
15. The Presentation of Christ in the Temple
16. The Mystical Supper

Addendum

17. The Icon of Saint George
18. The Icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent

Essentially, this volume includes the *Dodecaorton* of the twelve major feasts of our Lord. Added to the *Dodecaorton* are the icons of the Feast of the Falling Asleep of the Theotokos, the Hospitality of Abraham, and five of the icons of the Theotokos With Child.

A PRAYER RECITED BEFORE PAINTING AN ICON

Gennadios Limouris

O Divine Lord of all that exists, Thou hast illumined the Apostle and Evangelist Luke with thy Holy Spirit, hereby enabling him to represent thy most Holy Mother, the Theotokos, the one who held Thee in her arms and said:

“The grace of Him who has been born of me is spread throughout the world.”

Enlighten and direct my soul, my heart and my spirit.

Guide the hands of thine unworthy servant so that I may worthily and perfectly portray thine icon, that of thy Mother and all the saints, for the glory, joy and adornment of thy Holy Church.

Forgive my sins and the sins of those who will venerate these icons and who, kneeling devoutly before them, give homage to those they represent.

Protect them from all evil and instruct them with good counsel. This I ask, through the intercessions of thy most Holy Mother, the Apostle Luke and all the saints.

Amen [\[ii\]](#)

BRIEF THOUGHTS ON SACRED ICONS

Icons serve a purpose to the extent that they can assist us in becoming icons of God.

We are like darkened pieces of glass through which the light of eternity passes only dimly, but through ascesis, God's grace cleanses us so that in the words of St. Paul, "But we all, with open face beholding as in a glass the glory of the Lord, are changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18).

The much enlarged eyes are fixed on the transcendent world. The fine lips lack all sensuality...they are singing praises. The nose is merely the finest curve, the forehead broad and high...to emphasize the preoccupation with contemplative thought.... The full face establishes communion by plunging the gaze into the eyes of the spectator...(Paul Evdokimov).

What the words of the sermon are for the ear, so icons are for the eyes (Fr. Paul Florensky).

In iconography, the events of salvation are not interpreted historically but expressed mystically and embodied liturgically; they interpenetrate with one another. They become a witness to the "different way of life" which has broken through the bounds set by corruption. They invite us to a spiritual banquet, here, now (Archimandrite Vasileios).

Icons can depict not only God becoming man but also humanity becoming God (Dr. Gennadios Limouris).

The Incarnation justifies the icon. To strike at the icon is to strike against the Christological doctrine of the Incarnation.

The inner reality (of the icon) is "Taboric," spiritually illuminated. There is never a source of light in an icon. Light is its subject; you do not illuminate the sun. We can say that an iconographer paints with the Taboric light (Paul Evdokimov).

What the iconographer seeks to present in the icon is not human nature but deified human nature—the transformed person.

Leonid Ouspensky never understood iconography to be a mere art, not even a “religious” art, but a way to proclaim the Gospel (Dr. Constantine Scouteris).

Luther tolerated the images as an illustration. Calvin accepted only “historical scenes” of a general nature. For Protestants...there is no such thing as preaching through art, because art has no real significance (Paul Evdokimov).

What the book tells us in words, the icon tells us in colors, and makes it present to us. (The Council of AD 860)

Icons are not fundamentally intended to satisfy the inner human search for beauty, rather, to arouse repentance and compunction (Dr. Constantine Scouteris).

They (icons) do not reveal themselves to us at first sight. It is only gradually after a patient, prayerful presence that they start speaking to us. And as they speak, they speak more to our inner than to our outer senses. They speak to the heart that searches for God (Henry Nouwen).

A religious picture is an altogether different thing from a liturgical icon. The one is the creation of someone’s artistic talent, the other the flower and reflection of liturgical life. The one is of this world. It speaks of this world and leaves you in this world. The other brings you a simple, peaceful and life-giving message, coming down from above (Archimandrite Vasileios).

Luther said, “Christ’s Kingdom is a hearing Kingdom, not a seeing Kingdom” (Luther’s Collected Works, Weimar, 51 p. 11). In Orthodoxy God’s Kingdom is both a hearing Kingdom and seeing Kingdom.

St. Gregory of Nyssa writes that, “every person is the painter of his own life, and choice is the craftsman of the work, and the virtues are the paints for reproducing the image.”

“Christ is the icon of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation” (Col. 1:15).

We show icons respect and veneration (proskinesis) without any actual adoration (latreia) which belongs only to God.

Placing an icon in an art gallery is a matter of spiritual shame until, of course, the icon transforms the gallery into a spiritual church, as sometimes happened in the former Soviet Union (Fr. Meletios Webber).

According to the Fathers the icon is an expression of what exists, whereas the idol represents what does not exist; it is a fabrication, a sham (Theodore the Studite).

The icon is not a thing to look at, but something before which we fall down in worship and prayers—a theophany.

CHAPTER ONE

***THE ICON OF THE DESCENT INTO HADES—THE ANASTASIS—
SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE***

It is uniquely in the Church and through the eyes of the Church that Eastern spirituality sees Christ. In other words, He is known in the Holy Spirit. Christ always appears in the fullness of His Godhead, glorified and triumphant: even in His Passion; even in the tomb. The kenosis is always balanced by the splendor of the deity. Dead and laid in the tomb, He descends as a conqueror into Hades and destroys forever the power of the enemy. ^[iii] —Vladimir Lossky

The Descent Into Hades - The Anastasis



Easter is the highest holy day of the Orthodox Christian year. Without the resurrection of Jesus, life has no meaning. Referring to the burial of our body after we die, Pascal said, “the last act is bloody, however fine the rest of the play. They throw dirt over your head and it is finished forever.” Without the resurrection, the ultimate end of man is nothing more than a shovel full of dirt over a dead body. Without the resurrection of Jesus, to use the words of Eric Hoffer, “we are condemned to death at birth, and life is a bus ride to the place of execution. All of our struggling and vying is about seats on the bus, and the ride is over before we know it.”

Father Dimitri Dudko has written, “What sense is there if everything ends in death? A person dies and that is it. One can only really speak of life if life is eternal.”

And that is why Pascha (Easter) is the festival of festivals for Orthodox Christianity. It is the festival of the most radical, decisive, and ultimate deliverance this universe has ever seen. It is the cornerstone of our faith. “If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and our faith is empty” (1 Cor. 15:14). Fr. Dumitru Staniloae calls the resurrection “an explosion of cosmic joy.” It is the hinge of the entire Church year. All other Christian feast days flow from it. Pascha is so much the center that it is not regarded simply as one of the twelve great feasts but rather as “the eighth day of the week,” the endless day that illumines all other festivals. Every Sunday is considered to be a “little Pascha.” Because of the Resurrection, everything in Orthodox Christianity is song and doxology.

THE ICON ITSELF

The Paschal icon expresses powerfully the true meaning of Christ's resurrection. Jesus stands on the broken gates of hell, which are crossed over a black pit. In the pit, Satan lies bound in his own chains. Jesus is reaching out to each side, grasping Adam and Eve by their wrists and pulling them up from their tombs, while the righteous of all generations stand assembled behind Him waiting their turn. This is the icon that is first displayed in the center of the church for veneration on Holy Saturday.

Christ grasps Adam by the wrist—Leonid Ouspensky says—rather than the hand to make sure He has a firm grasp on him. The mother cat does the same seizing her kitten by the scruff of the neck to save it from danger.

OTHER CHARACTERS IN THE ICON

John Baggley describes the Old Testament saints in the icon, waiting to be rescued by the risen Christ.

Behind Adam stand King David and King Solomon, ancestors and prophets of the Saviour. Behind Solomon we see John the Baptist. He is the Forerunner who prepared the way of the Lord.... On the right Eve kneels with her hands raised in prayer and looks attentively towards Christ.... The figure of Eve, in posture and clothing, is reminiscent of the Mother of God (the new Eve). This link between Eve and Mary is stated by St. Ephraim the Syrian: “He entered Sheol and plundered its storehouses and emptied its treasures. He came then to Eve the Mother of all living... [who] became the well-spring of death to all living. But Mary budded forth, a new shoot from Eve the ancient vine.” Behind Eve in the icon we see Moses, with the tablets of the law; the exodus and covenant associated with Moses have found fulfillment in this new exodus from Hades and death, and in the New Covenant inaugurated by Christ. Behind Moses are other righteous dead who await liberation from Hades. Beneath the figure of Christ, the gates of Hades have been broken down, and the personification of Hades is seen in the darkness of the underworld, having lost those who had been in subjection to him and the power of death. The darkness of Hades is reminiscent of the cave in the icons of the Nativity, the Raising of Lazarus and the Crucifixion.

In the upper section of the icon the two peaks of rock remind us that “the earth shook and the rocks were split” (Matthew 27:51) in the earth-shattering aftermath of the death of Christ. The dividing of the rocks in the Anastasis icon seems to recall the division involved in the earlier Passover mystery—the dividing of the waters of the Red Sea as the people of Israel move from slavery in Egypt toward the freedom of the Promised Land. In each instance God makes a way for his people to pass from bondage to freedom: the ending of servitude in Egypt prefigured the ending of the tyranny of sin and death accomplished in Christ’s Paschal Mystery. [\[iv\]](#)

OLIVIER CLEMENT'S INSIGHTFUL ANALYSIS

The French theologian Olivier Clement comments further on the deeper meaning of this icon,

Imagine not a Christ clothed in the most dazzling white, bathed in the power of light, but a Christ who is descending into the abyss, who is crushing under his feet the gates of Hell. You can see there the broken gates, with their scattered locks and hinges; and, down below them, the shadowy outline of Satan, crushed there as well. Christ is literally grabbing Adam and Eve by the hand and making them soar out of their tombs. He is doing it for you, for me, and for all mankind. This is a scene which, for me, contains the very heart of the Christian message, especially for us, today, who find ourselves in a situation where we feel surrounded on all sides by the void, by violence, by nihilism of every kind. And so I ask myself if now is not the historic, God-provided time for us to make this “good news” resound: Christ has descended into Hell to conquer Hell, to conquer death, to conquer every form of Hell and death. And He does it always, He does it now, because what happened then has been inscribed in the omnipresence of God and thus constitutes a reality which is somewhat eternal.

[\[v\]](#)

HE CONQUERED DEATH BY HIS DEATH

Asked once by an interviewer what bothered him most about life, the late American poet Robert Lowell answered simply, “that people die.”

From the moment when man, because of sin, was banished from the tree of life, the whole earth became a burial ground. For every human being there is a tomb. A vast planet of tombs.

In one of those innumerable tombs scattered all over our planet, the Son of God conquered death by death. This is what the icon of the Descent into Hades proclaims so magnificently in color and symbol.

“Christ has risen from the dead. By His death He has destroyed death and to those in the tombs He has bestowed life.”

“We celebrate the death of death, the annihilation of Hell,” we sing at Pascha. The destruction of Hades and the death of death constitute the deepest meaning of the Resurrection.

The “New” Adam and the “Old” Adam

This icon portrays the new Adam (Christ) raising the old Adam from Hades. Dr. Constantine Cavarnos sees a great truth in the contrast of the two Adams:

Also, by bringing Adam into the scene, the iconographer reminds the onlooker of the contrast between the “Old Adam,” the first man, and the “New Adam,” Christ—a contrast which appears in Saint Paul’s First Epistle to the Corinthians (15:45) in Patristic writings, and in Orthodox hymnography. The New Adam, through His Incarnation, Crucifixion, and Resurrection, reversed the effects of the disobedience of the first Adam. “By truly becoming the New Adam, the Creator of Adam alone banished the curse of Adam,” says one of the hymns of the Church.[\[vi\]](#)

THE DESCENT IN ORTHODOX HYMNOLOGY

This icon is called the Descent into Hades or the Anastasis (the Resurrection) because the Resurrection that Jesus came to make possible for us began not on Easter Sunday morning; it began as soon as Jesus expired on the cross. As a hymn sung on Holy Saturday says,

In the grave with the body and in Hades with the soul, as God, while in paradise with the thief and upon the throne with the Father and the Spirit, wast Thou, O Christ, filling all things, thyself uncircumscribed.

Note these words:

In the grave with the body and in Hades with the soul, as God.

While His body was yet in the tomb, Jesus descended into Hades with His soul to begin the resurrection of Adam and Eve, together with all the Old Testament faithful. He was not resting in the tomb those three days. He was on a mission. This is why this icon is called the Resurrection icon. It does not provide us with an actual scene of Jesus rising from the tomb (the Anastasis), which no one ever witnessed. The church provides us instead with a powerful icon that describes not the actual event but the meaning of the Resurrection which began even before the physical, bodily resurrection of Jesus. That is when the spirit of the entombed Jesus descended to Hades to liberate the Old Testament faithful. It happened while His body was still in the tomb.

In the grave with the body and in Hades with the soul, as God.

THE HOLY SATURDAY PRE-resurrection service

The Orthodox Church celebrates the triumphant descent of the Savior into Hades on Holy Saturday. The sacred troparia and hymns of this day are among the most beautiful hymns ever written in their magnificent poetic and spiritual depth. Some have called these hymns even more impressive than those of Pascha.

The Synaxarion of Holy Saturday, for example, announces the victory we commemorate on that day as follows:

On the holy and great Saturday we commemorate the burial of the divine body and the descent into Hades of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, through whom the human race was invited by the inexpressible love of God to return from corruption to the pristine condition before Adam had sinned; to return and to be guided to eternal life.

All three *Stichera Idiomela* of Vespers for Holy Saturday repeat the phrase, “Today Hades *bemoans* loudly.... He *bemoans* because his authority and power have been destroyed.... He *bemoans* because his dominion is completely defeated and annihilated.... He *bemoans* because his power has been abolished and is no longer in force.”

The entire service of Holy Saturday circles around the event of the Descent of Jesus into Hades. The hymns of the day testify to the fact that for Eastern Christians the resurrection begins with the Descent into Hades on Good Friday evening and continues on to Holy Saturday.

In one hymn on Holy Saturday, we hear Jesus saying,

The Creation shall rejoice and all earth shall be glad, for Hades is now deprived of its armor, the enemy is defeated. The women shall come to Me with ointments. I redeem Adam and Eve and all mankind and I rise from the dead on the third day.

In another hymn we hear Satan complaining,

My might has gone. The shepherd was crucified but now he has awakened Adam. I am deprived of all who were my prisoners. All those I must release who were devoured by me. The graves were vacated by the Crucified and nothing, but nothing, is the value of Death's power.

Perhaps no one has interpreted the profound meaning of the icon of the Descent Into Hades better than Leonid Ouspensky:

The descent into hell was the last step made by Christ on the way of His abasement. By the very fact of “descending into the abyss of the earth,” He opened to us the access to heaven. By freeing the old Adam, and with him the whole of mankind from slavery to him who is the incarnation of sin, darkness and death, He laid the foundation of a new life for those who have united with Christ into a reborn mankind. Thus the spiritual raising of Adam is represented in the icon of the Descent as a symbol of the coming resurrection of the body, the first-fruit of which was the Resurrection of Christ. Therefore, although this icon expresses the meaning of the event commemorated on Great Saturday and is brought out for reverencing on that day, it is, and is called, an Easter icon, as a prefiguration of the coming celebration of the Resurrection of Christ and therefore of the future resurrection of the dead. [\[vii\]](#)

THE DESCENT IN SCRIPTURE

Scripture refers to the Descent of Jesus to Hades in several verses of which we will mention only a few. We read in 1 Peter 3:18-20:

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit; in which he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey when God's patience waited in the days of Noah.

Since the Church fathers interpret Jonah's descending into the whale's belly as a foreshadowing of Christ's descent into Hades, we read in Ode 6 of the Easter Canon:

Thou hast descended into the abyss of the earth, O Christ, and has broken down the eternal doors which imprison those who are found, and, like Jonah after three days inside the whale, Thou hast risen from the tomb.

WHAT DOES THIS DOCTRINE TEACH?

Who would ever say, “I love you so much I would go to hell for you”? Who else but Jesus! That is exactly what His love did for us! He descended into hell once, and He will descend there again and again to rescue us, as often as we end up there and call upon Him. “If I make my bed in hell, Thou art there,” sings the psalmist.

If most people are to find God anywhere today, it will be in hell: the hell of guilt, the hell of drugs, the hell of alcoholism, the hell of broken families, the hell of being separated from God. One usually expects to find God not in hell, but in heaven. But the good news of the doctrine of His Descent into Hades is that God in Christ has come into the very midst of our hell to seek us, to love us, to rescue us, and to lead us home to heaven.

St. Paul writes, “He who descended is He who also ascended far above all the heavens that He might fill all things” (Eph. 4:10). St. Paul links the ascension of Jesus with His descent in hell.

NO MATTER HOW DEEP THE DARKNESS, HE DESCENDS DEEPER STILL

Does Jesus descend into our hell today? Your hell? My hell? The answer: Yes! No matter how deep our darkness, He descends deeper still. Does He descend into the dark prison of alcoholism or drug addiction? Ask any recovering alcoholic or drug addict and he/she will confess that it was in that darkness when they hit bottom that they discovered the light and the power of God. For even the darkness is not dark to Him who is the light of the world.

“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). Christ has already descended to “the spirits in prison.” Does He not descend today into the dark prisons of addiction, depression, and insanity to free the spirits imprisoned there? Having already descended into the deepest depths of Hades for us, how can He not descend into our hells today?

HE DESCENDS TODAY

God's love is so great that He could not remain in heaven as long as His children suffered on earth, and He could not remain on earth as long as someone was in pain in Hades. God pursues us to the final limits of our flight from God, to the farthest depths of our distance from God, to the very abyss of Hades. He pursues us into the darkness of the earth, into the deepest pits of human suffering and death. His very Descent into Hades is the Resurrection. He tears Adam and Eve out of the pit. The doors of Hades, along with the hinges, are annihilated as the icon so well illustrates.

The late Metropolitan Anthony Bloom said once, "When we read in the Apostles' Creed the words: 'He descended into hell,' we tend to think glibly, 'that's just one of those phrases,'.... But I know from experience that it's true. Why? Because he descended into my hell."

Christ can enter any hell, particularly the hell we happen to be in. He can grab us by the wrist and lift us out of the tombs in which we bury ourselves through our sinful passions.

THE DARK LABYRINTH OF DEATH

The last words of the Lord's Prayer for Orthodox Christians are not "... deliver us from evil" but "Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit now and ever and unto the ages of ages. Amen." Christ has already descended into Hades! He has already destroyed the kingdom of darkness! In some icons, Jesus holds a scroll containing the good news to be proclaimed to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19).

HE DESCENDED INTO HADES, NOT HELL

It is important to remember that Christ did not descend into hell but into Hades. There is a great difference between the two. Hell and Hades are not the same.

To understand this difference, we need to look at the meaning of these words as used among the Jews in the days of Jesus.

The Hebrew word for hell is “Gehenna.” They got this word from the Valley of Hinnom, close to Jerusalem, where the city rubbish, burning day and night, emitted clouds of smoke with a powerful stench. By an ingenious metaphor, the Jews thought of the dead people—who had lived very wicked lives—as being thrown into a super Valley of Hinnom. Having lived very wicked lives, the Jews felt that they were irredeemable. That was Gehenna, their hell.

But when somebody died whose life had been more or less good, or perhaps indifferent, the Jews did not think of such people as having been cast into Gehenna; they thought of them as having gone down to Sheol, to the pit. And wherever you find the word “hell” used in the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for it is Sheol, which just meant the place where most of the dead people go.

The Hebrews had very vague ideas about the future life. They do not seem to have thought of Sheol as a particularly comfortable place or as a particularly uncomfortable place; it was just the world beneath. And when the Apostles’ Creed says that our Lord descended into hell, it doesn’t mean that He descended into Gehenna, into the place where the really wicked people are eternally punished. It means that He descended into Sheol, into the lower world, and preached, not to the souls of the damned, but to the souls of the dead who were in a kind of intermediate state. What was that intermediate state? How are we to think of it?

About one thing the teaching of the Church is quite clear: the holy patriarchs, people like Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, were not in hell at the time when our Lord descended—not what we mean by hell—and they were not in heaven. They had to wait for our Lord’s coming before they could get to heaven. And the place or the state in which in they waited for Christ’s coming is what we call Sheol or

Hades—not Gehenna.

Thus God did not throw these righteous souls into Gehenna, the rubbish heap. He kept them in Sheol until Good Friday, AD 33. The first thing Jesus did after He died on the cross was to leave His body resting in the tomb while His spirit, His soul, and His love descended into Sheol to preach to the Old Testament patriarchs, prophets, and kings who were earmarked for heaven. Why? Because they had looked forward by faith to Christ's coming and in that faith had lived holy lives and gone on worshipping the one, true God. They were ripe for heaven, but they could not get to heaven until Jesus had atoned for our sins. So they had to wait, and the waiting room assigned to them was called Sheol or Hades (not Gehenna).

That is what we mean when we say that our Lord descended to the people beneath. He didn't descend to Gehenna; but He descended to Sheol or Hades and preached to Adam and Eve and the holy patriarchs who were waiting for Him there.

HOW CONTEMPORARY ORTHODOX THEOLOGIANS EXPLAIN HADES

Fr. George Florovsky explains Hades simply as the realm of death: “The descent into Hades means first of all the entry or penetration into the realm of death, into the realm of mortality and corruption. And in this sense it is simply a synonym of death itself.”

Hierotheos, Metropolitan of Nafpaktos, explains further,

Therefore in the Orthodox Tradition Hades is not simply a particular place but the dominion of death and the devil. We say that the souls of those people who are in the power of the devil and death are in Hades. It is in this sense that we must regard the Church’s teaching about the descent of Christ into Hell, that is, that Christ entered into the realm of death, accepted to die, whereupon by the power of His death he conquered death, made it completely powerless and weak, and gave every person the possibility, by His power and authority, to escape the dominion, the authority and power of death and the devil.[\[viii\]](#)

“HIS HAND IS ALWAYS THERE”

Olivier Clement, the noted French Orthodox lay theologian describes the hand of Jesus as it appears in this icon:

What is God doing? He is crucified in all the horror of the world and yet, at the same time, he resurrects us, offering us the power of the Resurrection. That powerful hand held out lays hold of us, not by the hand, because one can give or not give one's hand, but by the wrist. Christ's hand seizes Adam by the wrist, seizes Eve by the wrist, in that extraordinary meeting of the two Adams, the first and the last.

That hand is always there, in the darkest of shadows. We must understand that the Christian God, the God to whom I wish to bear witness, is not some sort of celestial potentate who crushes us. As Saint Paul says in the epistle to the Philippians, God has “emptied himself.” He has destroyed himself out of love for us. He has emptied himself, has poured himself out unto death, even the death of the Cross. That God should open himself in order to make us enter into him, that is the mystery of the Descent into Hell.[\[ix\]](#)

He descends into the lowest place imaginable, into the deepest darkness in existence in order to destroy the power of darkness and the abode of demonic forces.

HOW DOES THIS HAPPEN?

Dee Pennock describes how this happens in her marvelous book, *God's Path to Sanity*:

One spring, we planted a tuberous begonia upside down. When we dug it up in the fall, we saw that it had started growing downward into the earth, but had soon made a U turn and brought itself up into the daylight and blossomed with the other begonias. We have, every one of us, been planted facing the earthly darkness of sin and death. This business of making our way upward and into the daylight, to blossom forth as the individuals God made us to be—this is the enlightened life to which our inborn instinct calls us. As daylight reached through four inches of dark soil to draw the begonia toward it, so the Lord Jesus Christ is always reaching even into the darkest places on earth and inside our souls to draw us into a blessed life. Holy people understand it. They say, He has called you out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). The Prophet told of it: Upon those who sat in the dark region and shadow of death the Light has shined (Matt. 4:16; Is. 9:2).^{[\[x\]](#)}

His hand is always there, extended to you and me.

He descends to the deepest abyss in order to raise us to the highest heaven, making us “partakers of divine nature” (theosis).

CHRIST COMPLETES HIS MISSION

Christ's mission in Hades was to complete His saving work. It is for this that He uttered the word "*Tetelesthe*" ("*It is finished*") from the cross. His task was to proclaim salvation not only to the living but also to the righteous dead. In the Old Testament it was thought that God no longer cared about those who were confined in Sheol. It is now revealed in Christ that this is not true. God cares for the living and the dead. "Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's," writes St. Paul. In Hades Jesus finishes His universal proclamation. He brings to all—both the living and the dead—the consequences of His saving sacrifice. As St. Justin the Martyr said, "The Lord, the Holy God of Israel, remembered His dead, those sleeping in the earth, and came down to them to tell them the good news of salvation."

WHAT HAPPENS TO SOULS TODAY?

Before the coming of Christ, every human being who died—whether righteous or not—was deprived of the joy of meeting the Lord. All went to a shadowy abyss called Hades or Sheol. After Christ's Resurrection, all this changed. Now death is a "falling asleep." In the body, we fall asleep to the anxieties of the earth, and peace descends upon us. Everyone who dies now, falls asleep until the body rises on the last day. While the body sleeps, the soul experiences what is called the "particular judgment," i.e., a foretaste of heaven or hell, until Christ returns, at which time we shall experience the fullness of the state we have chosen, i.e., to live with God or apart from God. God respects our free will to the very end. Thus, our body, like that of Christ in the tomb on Holy Saturday, rests from its labors anticipating the resurrection.

The tomb, however, for the true believer, is no longer a prison but an anteroom to heaven where the bride rests, anxiously anticipating the arrival of the Bridegroom. "Wait for your death as a young man waits for his bride," said one of the saints.

AN IMAGINARY CONVERSATION BETWEEN JESUS AND OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS

Ronald Knox, in his book, *The Creed in Slow Motion*, imagines a conversation Jesus could have had with some of the saints of the Old Testament during His descent into Sheol. It is highly imaginative, yet profoundly true. It goes like this:

When our Lord Jesus Christ had died on the Cross and left His body in the tomb to wait till Easter morning, the first thing which His spirit did was to visit the old patriarchs who had been waiting so many centuries for him to come. How they must have crowded round him, and what a lot he must have explained to them which they hadn't been able to understand properly hereto! "It's all right, Adam" (He will have said); "you did a very foolish thing, and a very wicked thing, when you ate the fruit of the tree although you had been told not to; but I have been hanging, from twelve to three this afternoon, on a very different kind of tree, and now the world has been redeemed from the consequences of your sin. It's all right, Eve; you disobeyed, but my Mother, by her obedience, has brought salvation into the world, as you brought sin into the world. You see now, Noah, what was the idea of building an ark to save yourself and your family from the flood? It was a prophecy of the Church which I am just going to found, the ark which stays afloat in a sinful world, and saves righteous souls from being engulfed in it. You, Abraham, when you sacrificed your son Isaac, or rather were prepared to sacrifice him, were doing what my heavenly Father did when he sent me into the world to die. Your ladder, Jacob, set up between earth and heaven, was the image of my Incarnation; you, Joseph, were sold for twenty pieces of silver, I was sold for thirty. Do you remember, Moses, how you set up a brazen serpent on a pole in the wilderness, and all the people who had been bitten by the snakes, if only they could be persuaded to look up at it, got well? That is what my Cross is going to do now for sinners." And so on, all down the list of the holy people whom we read about in the Old Testament. What a holiday that must have been for them all, when our Lord came and explained to them, at last, what their experiences in life had meant, and ended up, "Now you are going home with me; it is time you went home!" [\[xi\]](#)

All that is what we mean when we say that our Lord descended to Hades and

preached to the “spirits in prison,” to the holy patriarchs and to all the Old Testament faithful who were waiting for Him.

“His hand is always there extended to you and me.

BAPTISM IS OUR PERSONAL DESCENT INTO SHEOL

Through the sacrament of baptism we experience a real descent with Christ into His death. It is a descent into hell. St. Chrysostom expresses this truth very clearly when he writes, “the action of descending into the water and ascending from it symbolizes the descent into hell and the leaving of that abode.” Thus, baptism is not only dying and rising with Christ, it is also our descent into Sheol or hell and leaving it as we rise and take our first steps in following Jesus.

THE “BROKEN GATES”

Metropolitan Hierotheos explains that through His descent into Hades, Jesus did indeed destroy death and the power of the devil. He talks specifically of how the bronze gates of Hades were annihilated:

This event had already been prophesied in the Old Testament. The Prophet King David said: “He has broken the gates of bronze, and cut the bars of iron in two” (Ps. 107:16). And the Prophet Isaiah presents the word of God: “I will go before you and make the crooked places straight; I will break in pieces the gate of bronze” (Is. 45,2). Interpreting this event, St. John Chrysostom points out that he did not say that he opened the bronze gates, but that he broke them so that the prison would become useless. Nor did he say that he removed the gates, but that he broke them so that the prison could no longer be seen, because where there is no door, nor gate, even if one entered there, one could not be held. When Christ destroyed and broke something to pieces, then no one could mend it again.[\[xii\]](#)

My heart is glad, and my flesh also shall rest in hope.

For you will not leave my soul in hell.

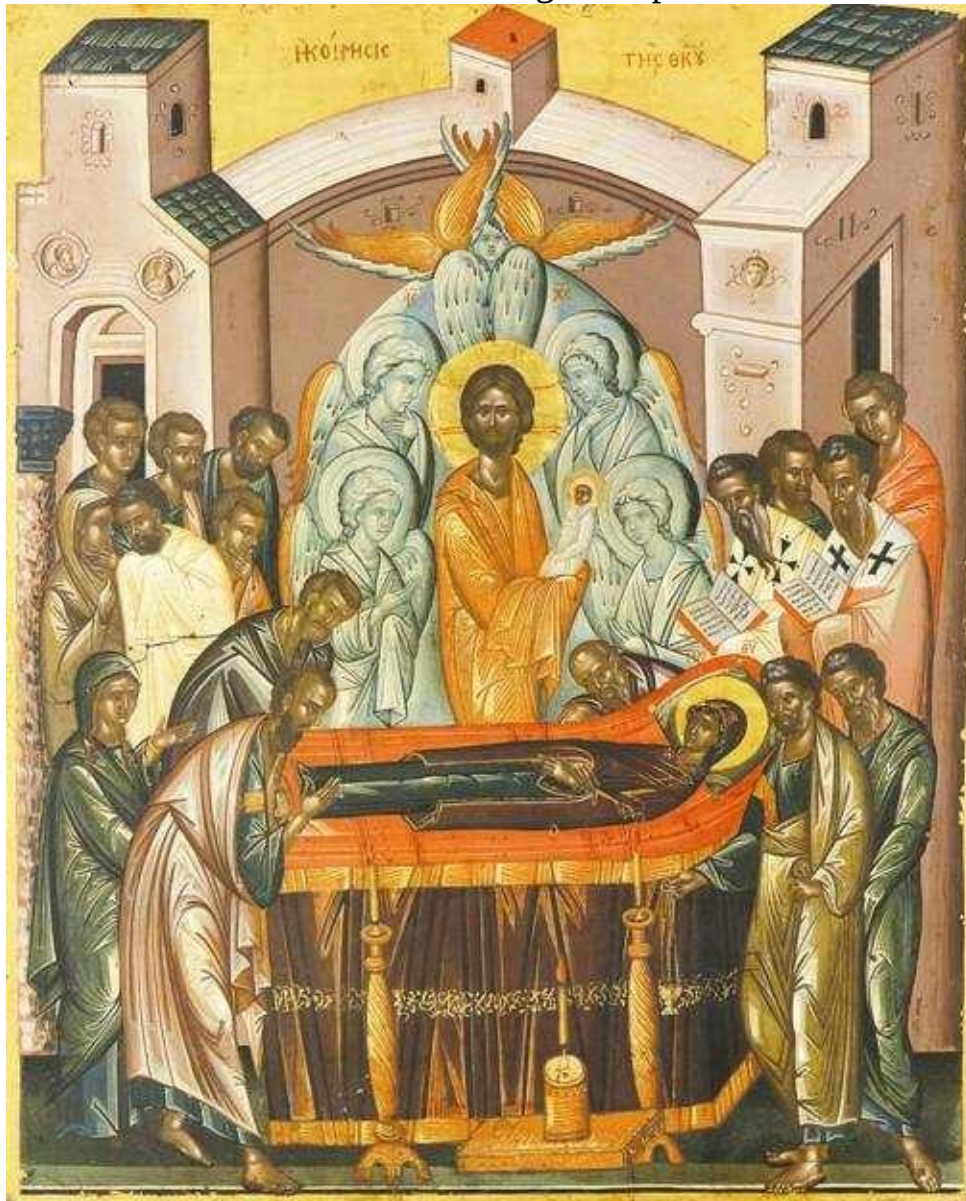
You will show me the path of life; in your presence is the fullness of joy, and at your right hand there is pleasure for evermore. —**Psalm 16:10-12**

O Lord God of my salvation, I have cried out to you day and night. My soul is full of troubles and my life has drawn near to Sheol. I lie in the depths of the pit, in the regions dark and deep; my friends and those who love me are removed far from me, and my companions are in darkness. But by grace, I defy the darkness, and I declare your saving help in the land of forgetfulness, crying aloud, Alleluia! —**From the Akathist to Jesus**

CHAPTER TWO

***THE ICON OF THE FALLING ASLEEP OF THE THEOTOKOS SPEAKS:
ITS MESSAGE***

The Falling Asleep of the Theotokos



Another icon that offers us a great message of hope is the icon of the Dormition or the Falling Asleep of the Theotokos depicting the apostles gathered around her bier. It is a powerful icon that can be used to explain the Christian view of death to children as well as adults. The icon portrays the body of Mary in a coffin. Above her, inside a radiant ray of light (*mandorla*), stands the Lord Jesus, holding in His bosom His mother's soul, pictured as a babe in swaddling clothes. This is to denote her birth through death into new and eternal life with God. We note how the roles have now been reversed. She who once held her infant Son is now held by Him.

The late Fr. John Meyendorff expressed amazement at how through the icon of the Dormition of the Theotokos, the subtle doctrine of the deification and its consequence, life everlasting for believers, became apparent and understandable to the simplest and most untutored eyes.

HOW IT HAPPENED

Tradition tells us that the apostles and disciples were mysteriously drawn together from the ends of the earth to be present in Jerusalem at the death of the Theotokos, who was buried in the Garden of Gethsemane. The apostle Thomas had not been present at the funeral. When he arrived three days after the burial and wanted to see the body of the Theotokos, the tomb was discovered to be empty. This event gave birth to the teaching that her body was taken up to heaven.

EXPLANATION OF THE ICON

On the left, the icon depicts St. Peter censing the body of the Theotokos. On the right with veiled hands, St. Paul is shown bending low at the foot of the bier. A later iconic development depicts the open gates of heaven, ready to receive the Virgin's body. The candle placed in front of the bier echoes the imagery of one of the hymns of the day, "Thy Son, O Virgin, truly has made thee dwell in the Holy of Holies as a bright candle stick, flaming with immaterial fire, as a golden censer burning with divine coal." Pictured among the apostles are three early bishops with vestments and halos: St. James, first bishop of Jerusalem, St. Timothy Hierotheus, and St. Dionysius the Areopagite.

It is interesting to note that the apostles gather at her deathbed just as they once gathered with her in the Upper Room when the Holy Spirit descended to empower the newly founded church (Acts 2).

A CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING OF DEATH

We gain an important Christian understanding of death through this beautiful icon. When we die, the body falls asleep in the Lord and is placed in the cemetery (from the Greek word *koimitirion*), i.e., a place where one sleeps. The body will indeed sleep there until the Second Coming of Jesus. The soul, however, is taken to heaven by Jesus, exactly as Jesus is portrayed in this icon, embracing and carrying His mother's soul to heaven. At the Second Coming, Jesus will raise (awaken) the buried (sleeping) body and reunite it with the soul. Thus shall "we ever be with the Lord," as St. Paul writes.

If you have lost a loved one recently, or not so recently, how consoling it is to meditate on this icon. How comforting to see your loved one in the embrace of Jesus, who is carrying him or her home to a special place He has prepared for those who love Him. As He promised, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me...I go to prepare a place for you that where I am, there you may be" (John 14:1-4).

THE DORMITION IN THE EAST AND WEST

The Feast of the Dormition of Mary, celebrated since the fourth century, is not mentioned in the Bible. It is part only of sacred tradition. For this reason, it is not an official teaching (dogma) of the Orthodox Church as it is the Roman Church which declared the Dormition a dogma in 1950 under Pius XII. The Orthodox Church does not declare a teaching to be a dogma (an official teaching of the Church) unless it appears both in sacred tradition and in the Bible.

Thus, the Dormition is a pious belief in the Orthodox Church. Yet it is a belief that does not contradict the Bible. What Jesus did for the Theotokos, He did in anticipation of what He will do for all of us at the Second Coming. Just as the body of the Theotokos was taken to heaven so will our body be after its resurrection at the Second Coming.

JERUSALEM OR EPHEBUS?

The Dormition is referred to as the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in the West, while it is called the Falling Asleep of the Theotokos (Dormition) in the East. It is the same event. Both churches believe in her total assumption, body and soul. When one visits the burial site of the Theotokos in Jerusalem today, one finds an empty tomb. The Dormition is celebrated on August 15 in both the East and the West. The Western Church believes that the body of the Theotokos was buried not in Jerusalem but in Ephesus.

Mary lived for a considerable period of time under the care of the Apostle John in Ephesus, where he was bishop. It is possible that before her death she returned to Jerusalem, where to this day there is the Church of the Dormition of the Mother of God. The oldest historical accounts testify that the Theotokos was buried there, where a church was later erected around her tomb.

TRYING TO UPSET THE BIER

In front of the Virgin's body, in some icons, there is a strange little character who tries to upset our lady's bier, and an angel comes to smite him. The point involved here is the argument, decided at the Council of Ephesus, about the Theotokos, and the attempt at that time to upset the Church's faith that she was indeed the Mother of God (Theotokos) and not just the mother of the man Jesus (Christotokos). All this is shown by this one little figure, trying to upset the bier on which the Virgin's body rests.

Paul Evdokimov explains this interesting aspect of the Dormition in detail:

The festal icon contains a detail concerning a Jewish priest, Athonius, who seeing the bier upon which the apostles had placed the body of the Theotokos, wanted to overturn it. He is struck blind, and the icon further shows his hands being severed by an angel. Receiving the apostles' teaching, however, he cries "Alleluia," and is restored. This is clearly a symbolic manner of teaching that the cult of the Virgin can only be explained from within the interior liturgical life and Tradition of the Church.^[xiii]

Thus, this magnificent icon helps explain our Orthodox Christian belief regarding death which is now a defeated enemy thanks to the resurrection of Jesus, who transformed death into a doorway that leads to life everlasting.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL MEANING OF THE ICON

In many instances the placement of the Dormition scene on the western wall of the church, traditionally the location of depictions of the Last Judgment, testifies to the eschatological meaning of this icon, which is seen as a precursor to the general resurrection which will take place at the last judgment.

In Byzantine churches, the worshipper faces east in worship. Before him is the icon screen that traces history from Old Testament kings and patriarchs, to Jesus and the apostles, to the local saints on the lowest rung. On the opposite west wall was usually a fresco either of the Dormition or the Last Judgment. James S. Billingham describes the meaning of this icon as follows, “The Last Judgment was the future and the congregation in the nave of the church was the present. They stand between this past and this future, and they went out of the church, looking at what lay ahead ultimately for them after they lived out their days.” [\[xiv\]](#)

Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev on the Descent

Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev writes the following about Christ's descent into Hades:

There have existed many interpretations of this event:

1. Many writers maintain that Christ freed all who were held captive in hell.
2. Others thought that only the Old Testament righteous were liberated.
3. Another group held that only those who came to believe in Christ and followed Him were saved.
4. Finally others held that Christ freed only those who had lived in faith and piety during their earthly lives.

The first interpretation is most widely reflected in the liturgical texts of the Orthodox Church: that Christ "emptied" hell and "not a single mortal" remained. The first and second opinions were endowed with equal authority in the Eastern Christian patristic tradition, but with the passing of the centuries the first gradually gave way to the second. In the Western tradition after Augustine, the second and fourth views were given preference. The idea that all the dead received the opportunity to be saved is quite widespread among Eastern Christian writers, and it was only in the West where some authors labeled it heretical...

Elsewhere he adds:

Can there be an answer here to the complex questions of whether or not it is possible for nonbelievers to be saved? Although Orthodox tradition has always asserted that there is no salvation outside of Christ, Baptism and the Church, not everyone who failed to meet Christ during earthly life is deprived of the possibility of being liberated from hell, for even in hell the message of the Gospel is heard. Having created human beings with free will, God accepted responsibility for the salvation of humanity; and this salvation has been accomplished by Christ. A person who deliberately rejects Christ and the Gospel makes a choice for the devil and becomes guilty of self-condemnation: "He who does not believe is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18). However, how can someone who has not heard the Gospel at all be condemned? "Imagine that the Gospel was not

proclaimed to those who died before Christ's coming" says Clement of Alexandria. "Then both their salvation and their condemnation is a matter of crying injustice." In the same way, those who have died after Christ's coming without hearing the Gospel message cannot be treated as if they deliberately rejected him. This is why Christ preached in hell in order that every person created by Him could make a choice for good or evil.^{[\[xv\]](#)} —Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev

THE MESSAGE OF THE ICON

John Bagglely describes the message of the icon as follows:

The faith expressed in the Dormition icon is a faith which transforms our view of death from one of unmitigated loss into one of commendation and hope. Like the apostles gathering around the body of the Mother of God, we gather around the bodies of those we love as we take part in their funeral rites. Like the Mother of God herself, we commend our souls into the hands of her Son. Like millions of Christians before us we pray that the ties of kinship which bind us together within the body of Christ and the Communion of Saints will sustain us both as we pray for those who have passed through the gates of death, and as we ourselves prepare to tread that same path. Like the soul of Mary in the arms of her Son we hope to be born again into the new life of the Age to Come, of which we have already had a foretaste in this life.[\[xvi\]](#)

HOW LIFE WILL BE CONSUMMATED

This icon illustrates that Christians know how the story of life will end. It will be consummated at the Supper of the Lamb in the new Jerusalem, whose “temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb” (Rev 21:22). Here God will “wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away” (Rev. 21:3a, 4).

“The Source of life is laid in the tomb, and the tomb itself becomes a ladder to heaven” (Canticle from the Dormition service).

IN THE THEOTOKOS HUMAN NATURE REACHED ITS GOAL

In the words of Fr. Sergius Bulgakov:

The church believes that dying a natural death (Mary) was not subject to corruption, but, raised up by her Son, she lives in her glorified body at the right hand of Christ in the heavens.... Her body is completely spiritual and transfigured. She is the justification, the end and the meaning of creation. She is in this scene the glory of the world. In her, God is already “all in all.”

The Dormition is the main celebration of the life of Mary and one of the truly great feasts of the Church year. “It is a feast not only of Mary but of all human nature, for, in Mary, human nature reached its goal” (Lev Gillet).

SHE THROWS OPEN THE WAY OF DEIFICATION TO ALL OF US

Vladimir Lossky expands upon what Fr. Bulgakov wrote when he writes that the Theotokos is “the glory of the world”:

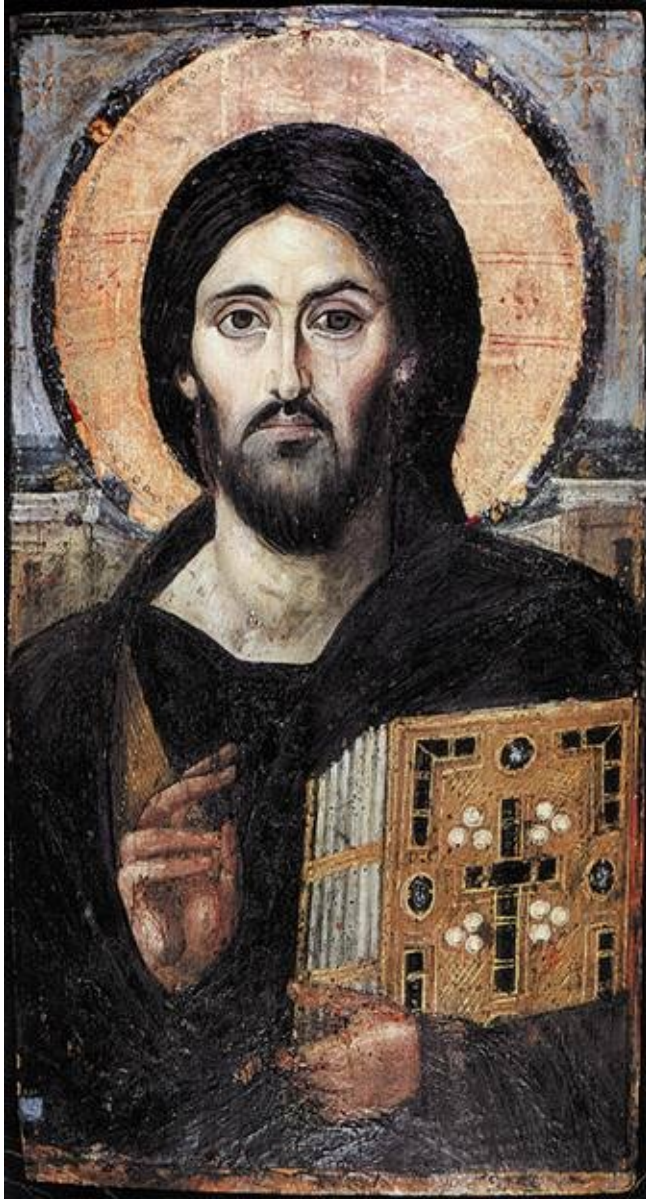
She who gave human nature to the Word and brought forth God become man, gave herself freely to become the instrument of the incarnation which was brought to pass in her nature purified by the Holy Spirit. But the Holy Spirit descended once more upon the Virgin, on the day of Pentecost; not this time to avail Himself of her nature as an instrument, but to give Himself to her, to become the means of her deification. So the most pure nature which itself contained the Word, entered into perfect union with the deity in the person of the Mother of God...death had no more dominion over her. Like her Son, she was raised from the dead and borne up to heaven—the first human hypostasis in whom was fulfilled the final end for which the world was created. Thenceforth the church and the entire universe have their crown, their personal achievement which throws open the way of deification to the whole creation.[\[xvii\]](#)

CHAPTER THREE

THE ICON OF THE PANTOCRATOR SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

I do not adore the creation rather than the Creator, but I adore the one who became a creature, who was formed as I was, who clothing Himself in creation without weakening or departing from His divinity, that He might raise our nature in glory and make us partakers of His diving nature. Together with my King, my God and Father, I worship Him who clothed Himself in the royal purple of my flesh.... Therefore I boldly draw an image of the invisible God, not as invisible, but as having become visible for our sakes by partaking of flesh and blood.... Depict His wonderful condescension, His birth from the Virgin, His baptism in the Jordan, His transfiguration on Tabor, His sufferings which have freed us from passion, His death, His miracles which are signs of His divine nature, since through divine power He worked them in the flesh. —**St. John of Damascus**

The Pantocrator



The typical Byzantine icon of Christ is that of the Pantocrator, the Lord Omnipotent. It is the image of the glorified Christ regnant on His heavenly throne. We are not even sure that it is not more an image of the eternal Father than that of the Son. But, as the Son is the image of the Father, so through the face of the Son we see the Father as well. Thus, the Pantocrator is considered by some as the icon of both the Father and Son. “He Who sees Me sees the Father,” said Jesus. The Pantocrator is an icon of the almighty and transcendent God made incarnate in His Son. Throughout the empire, the victory of Constantine through the cross meant that Christ was King over all, the Pantocrator.

In the catacombs, Christ was depicted as the Good Shepherd who tended His flock and won their allegiance. In an age where the Huns, the Vandals, and later the Muslim infidels threatened the very fabric of the newly established Church, the Christians needed an emphasis on the Almighty God who sat enthroned as emperor, monarch, and ruler, surrounded by His heavenly court of saints and angels, dominating His flock. It is somewhat of the emphasis we find in the hymn:

This is my Father’s world:
Though the wrong seems oft’ so strong,
He is the ruler yet.

The Pantocrator icon, although portraying God in His majesty, is strictly paternal for Eastern Christians. In the words of Fr. Staniloae,

In the East the lordship of Christ has never been separated from His goodness. It has been viewed paradoxically as the lordship of ‘the Lamb who was slain’ (Rev. 5:12-13), just as the term Pantocrator has been associated with that ‘Father,’ good, kind and intimate.... The divine omnipotence is qualified immediately as paternal. Before everything else...God is Father and only after is He Creator, Judge.... And He is all these because He is Father.[\[xviii\]](#)

It may be noted that the term “Pantocrator” and the idea behind it appear in the book of Revelation. Thus in Revelation 1:8, it is said, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the one who was and who is to come, the Pantocrator” (Almighty). The use of the multicolored band around Him in the domes of Orthodox

churches is based on Revelation 4:3 where the iris or rainbow is said to surround the throne of God.

DO WE KNOW WHAT CHRIST LOOKED LIKE?

The fact is that we do not know, but we do not base the actual visage of Christ on anyone's fanciful imagination. We share with you some possibilities of its origin. One of the most frequently painted icons of the Church is known as "The Savior Not Made by Human Hands." It was copied from what is considered to be a miraculous image of Jesus' face imprinted on a linen cloth just before He was crucified. It is truly amazing how, century after century, the face of Christ on icons remains more or less similar to the one found on the original linen imprint. In the words of Paul Evdokimov, "The key to all icons is the 'acheiropoietic' (not made by hands) icon of the Holy Face of the Saviour; it is on a veil held up by angels for us to see, precisely not a portrait of Jesus, but the icon of his presence." [\[xix\]](#)

One of the oldest existing icons of the Pantocrator type was given to St. Catherine's Monastery in the Sinai Desert in the sixth century. It is called the Sinai Christ and is still popular today.

ST. VERONICA'S HEADCLOTH

According to holy tradition, a woman of Jerusalem handed her headcloth to Jesus on His way to Calvary, and He wiped His brow and returned it to her. The headcloth was found to bear His perfect likeness upon it. It was called "Vera = true, and Icon = likeness." The woman of Jerusalem became St. Veronica. The Orthodox Church reveres the memory of St. Veronica, the holy martyr, on July 12. This headcloth has disappeared over the centuries.

THE HOLY MANDYLION

A similar story of the face of Jesus being imprinted on a linen cloth is mentioned by Eusebius in his “Ecclesiastical History.” It tells of King Agbar who invited Jesus to come to Edessa to heal him. Because Jesus was unable to go, an imprint of the face of Jesus, made by placing a linen cloth on His face, was sent to Agbar. This is called the Holy Mandylion and is celebrated on the Orthodox calendar on August 16, as the Feast of the Holy Visage, or Mandylion.

In his work on icons, Michael Quenot sees these stories as related to the legend of Veronica’s veil, into which Christ is supposed to have imprinted His face on the way to Golgotha.[\[xx\]](#)

THE SHROUD OF TURIN

Another source of “the image not made with hands” could be what is now the Shroud of Turin. This shroud was preserved in Constantinople and exhibited publicly for veneration with great devotion every Friday of the year. It was kept in the Church of St. Mary in Blachernae (Constantinople).

This is how, no doubt, the widespread veneration of a similar image of Christ on a shroud originated in the East. On Good Friday and Holy Saturday, Orthodox churches continue to venerate and deeply revere the full-length image of Christ on a shroud, which is carried in a procession around the church, beautifully decorated with flowers and placed in a symbolic tomb with worshippers singing profoundly theological hymns as they come up to kiss the shroud.

Folded in eight so that only the image of the Face was visible on the top, the shroud of Christ was taken to the West after the Sack of Constantinople in 1204, ending up in Turin. It is thought some iconographers may have copied only the top visible image of the head of Christ from the folded shroud. So it is that some believe “The Image of Christ Not Made With Hands” may have originated, along with the Holy Face of Veronica which developed in a later age.

Commenting on the icon of the passion of Christ, St. Tikhon wrote:

Keep in your house a picture of the passion of Christ, look at it often and with reverence: it will be to you a substitute for continual reading and visible history. Throw away those masquerading pictures which weaken and tempt and burn your flesh; paint instead the tribulations and victories of Christ; the whole deepest content of the gospel is portrayed in the passion of Christ and incites us to imitation.

THE SINAI PANTOCRATOR

One of the oldest existing icons of the Pantocrator type is the Sinai Christ. Some believe that it bears a striking resemblance to the image of the face of Jesus on Veronica's linen cloth as well as the image found on the Holy Mandylion. It is also believed to bear features similar to the face of Jesus on the Shroud of Turin, purported to be the winding sheet in which the body of Jesus was wrapped after being removed from the Cross. For this reason, the Pantocrator icon is called the face of Jesus "not made by hands"—*aheiropoiotos* in Greek. It is truly amazing how century after century the face of Christ on Eastern icons remains more or less similar to the early imprints of the "not made by human hands" icon.

This classic icon has been described as having the face of a friend, showing us a man who is approachable, even beckoning. As one person described it, "It is a face that has more than once comforted me and has more than once reduced me to tears." With His left hand, Jesus holds a jewel-studded Gospel book; with His right hand He is blessing me, not accusing me, or reprimanding me, or singling me out—but *blessing* me. His two fingers are raised, symbolizing His dual nature, the other three are folded down, symbolizing the Trinity. The expression on His face expresses the mystery of Christ's human and divine nature which lies at the heart of the Orthodox Christian faith. A golden nimbus or halo encircles His head symbolizing His divinity. The origin of the Sinai icon is veiled in mystery. The iconographer is unknown. There are those who believe it was painted by angels. It is considered to be an icon "not made by human hands."

Sister Wendy Beckett describes the Sinai icon as portraying a much more human Jesus, "one who is able to bear all our burdens. His gaze is compassionate, perhaps slightly sorrowful. He knows we are sinners, and He knows what sin is, though not from personal experience. He is there to bless us, and to teach us, and to make us certain that in Him we can defeat the world in which we are so painfully involved." [\[xxi\]](#)

EACH ICON MUST BE IDENTIFIED

One of the canons of iconography requires that the names of the saints represented appear on every icon. Thus, the traditional icon of the Pantocrator contains the Greek letters IC XC on either side of Christ. This is an abbreviation of Jesus (IC) identifying His human name, and XC, His divine title, which means the Anointed One, the Christ or Messiah. Thus, the two natures of Christ are expressed: human and divine. On some icons of the Pantocrator there appear the words O Q N, representing the name God gave Moses when Moses asked Him for His Name: “The One Who is.” The colors most often used for the Pantocrator icon are gold to signify that He is greater than king or emperor, red to signify the incarnation, blue to signify His divinity, and purple to signify His power.

The halo that surrounds Christ’s head expresses the fact that Jesus is the light of the world. Halos on icons of the saints show that they are people who have been illumined by Christ. His light shines through them.

Christ’s right hand offers a gesture of blessing to express the fact that He was sent into the world “not to condemn the world but that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3:17). The Gospel book or scroll held in His left hand is either open or closed. When open it reveals in synopsis what He taught: “I am the Light of the World,” or “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life.” Paul Evdokimov says, “The Judge—Christ—holds the book of the Gospels as the only and unique interpreter of its meaning.”

IN BUST FORM AND FULL-LENGTH

The Pantocrator icon may appear in bust form, showing only His upper body (as in the dome), or it may also appear full length or enthroned, as it does in the full length icon of Jesus on the iconostasis. This, too, is a Pantocrator icon, albeit full length or enthroned.

Since Christ is the incarnate Son of God and our Savior, He is placed at the highest point of the church building, i.e., the top of the dome. However, because of His importance, He is also placed on the icon screen where He always occupies the first panel to the right of the royal door—a position He deserves as the Pantocrator—the ruler of the universe, quite literally “Lord of all.”

The expression on the face of the Pantocrator is most often merciful and compassionate, expressing His willingness to forgive “seventy times seven.” There are a few versions of the Pantocrator icon, however, which confront us with a stern and fierce Messiah, such as the one in Daphni (Greece). These few stern icons attempt to express His distaste for sin.

A thirteenth century commentator, confronted by such a stern face on a Pantocrator icon, offered the following very rational explanation, “Christ’s eyes are joyful and welcoming to those who have a clean conscience, but for those who are condemned by their own judgment, they are wrathful and hostile” (Nicolaos Misarites).

“ALMIGHTY”

The Nicene Creed calls God ALMIGHTY, which is the meaning of the Greek word Pantocrator. Of course, that is really not saying much about God that we do not already know, because if He is God He has to be Almighty.

The icon which best expresses the almighty power of God is that of the Pantocrator which looks down from the dome of most Orthodox churches. It is the largest and most impressive of all the icons. It dominates the whole edifice. The representation consists of a large bust of Christ surrounded by a multicolored circle or rainbow which is said to surround the throne of God. The whole figure of Christ, His face, neck, shoulders, the huge halo round His head, the majestic manner in which he holds the Gospel book in His left hand and blesses with His right, all suggest great power and magnificence. It is a visual expression of the Almighty God—He who will at last prevail; He who is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end; He who sits enthroned and rules over the universe; He who through His resurrection has overcome sin, death, and suffering and reigns triumphantly; He whom God the Father “raised... from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named... and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the church” (Eph. 1:20-22).

ALMIGHTY IN NATURE

Every day science is uncovering more of God's mighty power in nature. An example of this is the tremendous power that exists in the atom. In a single cup of cold water there is enough energy to propel a ship across the Atlantic. It has been estimated that the earth receives only a twenty-millionth part of one percent of the sun's output. Yet this infinitesimal amount from one of the trillion similar stars makes it possible to live and have warmth, food, and light. Who has put all this power in nature? Who but the Almighty, whom the Nicene Creed describes as "Maker of heaven and earth." He is bigger, infinitely bigger, and more powerful than the universe He created.

ALMIGHTY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

It is not only nature but also the Bible that speaks of the might and power of God. We read in Psalm 104:

“Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, thou art very great! Thou...who hast stretched out the heavens like a tent...who makes the clouds thy chariot, who rides on the wings of the wind.... The mountains rose, the valleys sank down to the place which thou didst appoint them.... Thou makest springs gush forth in the valleys; they flow between the hills, they give drink to every beast of the field. From thy lofty abode thou waterest the mountains; the earth is satisfied with the fruit of thy work.... Thou dost cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate.... Thou hast made the moon to mark the seasons; the sun knows its time for setting... O LORD, how manifold are thy works! In wisdom hast thou made them all.”

This is how the psalmist in the Old Testament extols the almighty power of God.

ALMIGHTY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus Himself manifests the power of God as no one before Him had ever done. He heals the ten lepers, gives sight to the blind, expels demons, raises the paralytic, stills the raging storm, feeds 5,000 people with a few loaves, and brings Lazarus back from the dead. Here the Almighty God is revealed also as a God of love and mercy. Without this primary sense of power, God's other qualities, His love and mercy, might seem to be merely forms of weakness.

WHY THE EMPHASIS ON HIS GREATNESS?

The Bible does not emphasize God's greatness in order to make man feel tiny and insignificant. On the contrary, His greatness is set over against the need of man. It does not make man say, "If God is so great, then I must be like a worm to Him." Rather it helps him say, "He is great and therefore able to help and protect me."

This thought is brought out in the fortieth chapter of Isaiah where we read, "Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand and marked off the heavens with a span, enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure and weighed the mountains in scales and the hills in a balance?" Here is power! But the passage is preceded by, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those who are young." This great power is in the hands of a loving Shepherd! The whole chapter ends with the words, "They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." The vast power and energy of God exist not to belittle man, but to enhance him; they are at the disposal of those who trust Him. This is the faith we express when we confess God to be "Almighty," "*Pantocrator*."

THE ALMIGHTY AND TRANSCENDENT ONE BECOMES IMMANENT

At times we get the feeling that this Almighty Pantocrator whom we see high up in the dome of the church is far removed from us. But this is not so. He is Emmanuel: God beside us; God within us; and God above us. Through the Incarnation the transcendent God became immanent.

I recall visiting a parishioner at the Mayo Clinic. As we talked about Jesus and prayed together, I asked her to visualize Jesus as the Pantocrator, the Almighty God, hovering above her on the ceiling just above her hospital bed. Together we prayed to this ever-present, overshadowing, almighty, loving Lord and Savior as we committed ourselves and our whole life to Him for healing of soul and body.

Because our God is the Almighty Pantocrator, we Orthodox Christians have a special prayer whereby we confess and claim His great power. We pray, “Holy God. Holy Mighty. Holy immortal have mercy on us.”

Because He is the Almighty Pantocrator, God’s word says:

“He is able to help them that are tempted.”

“He is able to keep you from falling.”

“He is able to supply all your need.”

“He is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think.”

“He is able to save to the uttermost.”

“He is able to subdue all things unto Himself.”

“I can do all things through Christ who strengtheneth me” (St. Paul).

“We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us” (St. Paul).

This is not just talk. This is the actual clinical experience of people who have discovered Christ’s power in their lives.

“Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy; to the only wise God our Saviour, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever” (Jude 1:24-25).

THE FACE OF CHRIST AND BUDDHA: A CONTRAST

Gennadios Limouris offers a telling contrast between the face of Christ and the face of Buddha:

The Orthodox philosopher and theologian Olivier Clement compares the image of Christ with images in other religions—in particular with the image of the Buddha—and even the image of a Christian saint with that of a Buddhist. The Christian face reaches fulfillment in communion. It is enclosed in the microcosm of humanity, whereas the Buddhist face is suppressed in an inwardness where there is no longer the self or the other but an indescribable nothingness. The face, the “prosopon,” is in both cases “haloed.” But the Christian face is in the light like iron in the fire, a light which glows and turns the microcosm outwards towards a universe full of hope, towards the macrocosm of humanity. The Buddhist face, on the contrary, expands to become one with the luminous sphere of which the halo is the cross-section. The Christian face is thus, at once and the same time, inwardness and outwardness; and the Buddhist face, with its eyes closed in self-recollection, is plunged in the void of silence and interrogation.[\[xxii\]](#)

A story is told of the Buddha in the form of a dialogue:

Pilgrim: Are you a god?

Buddha: I am not a god.

Pilgrim: What are you?

Buddha: I am awake!

Awake? The eyes of the Pantocrator Christ are not closed as Buddha’s but wide open:

“His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me” (C.D. Martin).

A PERSONAL TESTIMONY

One who has meditated deeply on the Sinai icon of the Pantocrator wrote:

The icon of the Sinai Christ, like any icon of Jesus Christ Pantocrator, represents the Son of God as a heavenly personage. It reminds me of the reality that lies beyond it, a powerful reality which gives it its name and its meaning.... It occurs to me, however, that I, too, am made in the image of God and am therefore myself an icon in the world. No matter where I go or what circumstances I encounter, my value lies in the One whose image is imprinted upon my being. Whether I am battered or beautiful, old or modern, colorful or neutral, original or a copy of an original, I remain an icon, bearing in my human nature the image of Christ.... It is my prayer that now and then, someone will recognize the image of Christ in me and will look through me like a window—opaque and tarnished and dusty as I am—and will fix their eyes on the realities of heaven.[\[xxiii\]](#)

Archbishop Yannoulatos of Albania describes himself as a candle burning before the icon of our Lord.

I Want Someone With A Face

A little boy was being put to bed by his mother. Kissing him, she said, “Good night, Johnny. Sleep well.” Then she turned out the light and started for the door. A sudden fear came over the child as the darkness closed in on him.

“Am I to be left all alone, Mother,” he asked, “and in the dark, too?”

“Yes, My dear,” replied the mother. “but you know you have God with you all the time.”

“Yes, I know God is here,” said the boy, “but I want someone who has a face.”

So it was before Christ was born. Mankind knew there was a God, but He was a God without a face. More than anything else mankind wanted to see God and to discover Him as a real Person with an actual life. This is what God did for us through the Incarnation. He became a Person. He took on a face—the kindest and most beautiful face ever known to man —the face of Jesus.

In the face of Jesus we see:

God Revealed
God Lovable
God in Human Flesh
God Approachable
God with Us

FOCUS ON THE PANTOCRATOR

The icon that truly represents Christ in the Eastern Christian world has always been the Pantocrator Christ. It is in His face alone that we see “the light of the knowledge of the glory of God” (2 Cor. 4:6). It makes a huge difference in one’s life when one focuses on the risen and ascended Lord before whom “every knee should bow...” (Phil. 2:10-11). Who can feel hopelessly anxious about the current world affairs if one is focused on the Pantocrator Christ enthroned at the center of the universe? Even when the world spins out of control, we are assured that “He’s got the whole world in His hands.”

Images make a difference. The East does not focus on a weak Christ, “meek and mild,” but on the Pantocrator. “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, Who is and Who was, and Who is to come, the Almighty” (Rev. 1:8).

In the words of Gennadios C. Limouris:

The icon, therefore, is not purely decorative, nor merely an illustration, as many say, of the Scriptures. It is an integral part of the liturgy and, as one great iconographer and theologian, Leonid Ouspensky, has written, “a means of knowing God and becoming one with him.” It permits us to know God in beauty.

For God, indeed, has not only made himself heard but also made himself visible. He gave himself a face.[\[xxiv\]](#)

The following words by St. John of Damascus describe why Eastern

Christians revere the icon of the Pantocrator: It expresses their belief in the Incarnation:

It is obvious that when you contemplate God becoming man, then you may depict Him clothed in human form. When the invisible One becomes visible to flesh, you may then draw His likeness. When He who is bodiless and without form, immeasurable in the boundlessness of His own nature, existing in the form of God, empties Himself and takes the form of a servant in substance and in stature and is found in a body of flesh, then you may draw His image and show it to anyone willing to gaze upon it. Depict His wonderful condescension, His birth

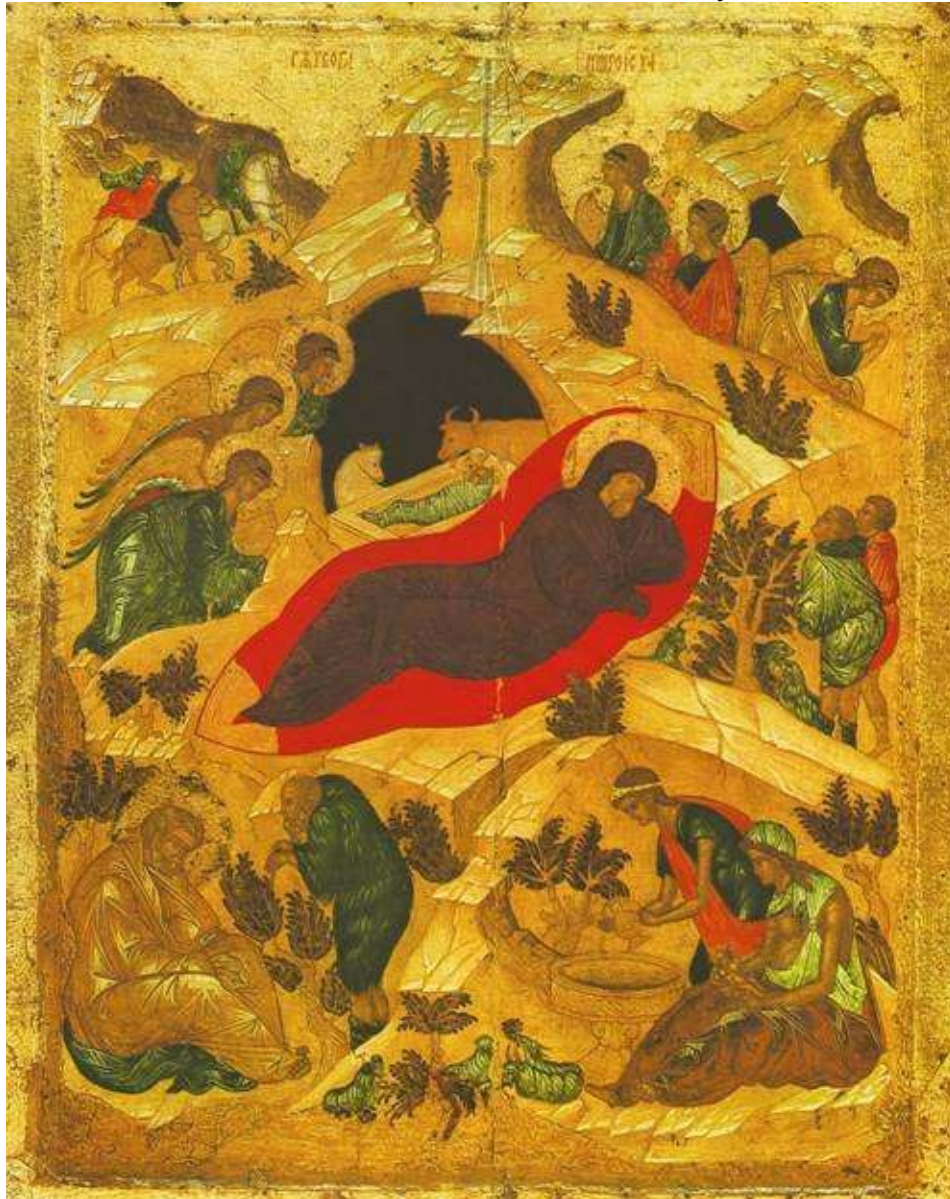
from the Virgin, His baptism in the Jordan, His transfiguration on Tabor, His sufferings which have freed us from passion, His death, His miracles which are signs of His divine nature, since through divine power He worked them in the flesh.[\[xxv\]](#)

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ICON OF THE NATIVITY SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

St. John Chrysostom calls the feast of the birth of Christ the “capital of all Feasts.” All other feasts of the Lord, from Epiphany to the Ascension, flow from the Nativity. St. Gregory the Theologian calls Christmas “not a festival of creation but of recreation.... He came to consecrate the universe.”

The Nativity



The birth of Christ is an historical event because it happened at a specific point in history, when Caesar Augustus was the Emperor of Rome and Herod was ruler of Judea. This is meant to emphasize the fact that Jesus is an historical person who assumed real human flesh and that the incarnation is not a myth.

HISTORICAL YET MYSTICAL

Although it is historical, the Nativity of Jesus remains a mystery. Who can understand how the second person of the Godhead became human, taking on flesh in the person of Jesus. Thus, as Metropolitan Hierotheos writes, “The historical does not remove the mystery, nor does the mystery do away with the historical.” The same Jesus who was born historically in Bethlehem comes to be born mystically and existentially in us through the holy Eucharist in every liturgy. For when we live in the Church we experience and participate personally and communally in every event in the life of our Lord: Christmas, Pascha, the Ascension, *etc.*

One of the Nativity hymns expresses this thought magnificently:

Bethlehem has opened Eden: Come let us see! We have found joy hidden! Come, let us take possession of the paradise within the cave. There the unwatered stem has appeared, from which forgiveness blossoms forth! There the undug well is found from which David longed to drink of old! There the Virgin has borne a child, and at once the thirst of Adam and David is made to cease. Therefore let us hasten to this place where for our sake the eternal God was born as a little child! (Ikos of the Nativity of the Lord after Canticle 6).

THE ORIGIN OF THE FEAST

The Feast of the Nativity first developed in the West at the beginning of the fourth century and soon spread from Rome to the East, where it became well established by the end of the fourth century.

In the Orthodox East, the celebration of the Lord's birth takes place after a 40-day period of preparation by prayer and fasting called Advent. On the second Sunday before Christmas, Orthodox Christians commemorate the forefathers of Christ, His human ancestors. On the last Sunday before Christmas, we commemorate all the Old Testament faithful from the beginning up to Joseph. After Christmas, we commemorate the Mother of God on December 26. On the first Sunday after the Nativity we commemorate Joseph the betrothed, David the royal ancestor of Christ, and James the brother of the Lord, who are of the lineage of Jesus. The joy of the Feast of the Nativity is spread to last a full ten days after Christmas, during which there is no fasting.

THE ICON ITSELF

The Icon of the Birth of Jesus shows the creator of the universe entering history as a newborn babe. The little helpless figure in swaddling clothes in a cave represents the complete submission of Christ to the physical conditions governing the human race. Yet He remains Lord of creation. The angels sing praises to Him. The magi and the shepherds bring their gifts. The sky salutes Him with a star. The earth provides Him with a cave. The animals watch him in silent wonder, and we humans offer Him one of us, the Virgin Mother.

THE CAVE

The earth offers Jesus a cave in which to be born since we humans had no room for Him in the inn. His own people did not receive Him. “He was in the world, and the world was made through Him, and the world did not know Him. He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:10-11). Hence the cave. John Baggley writes,

The cave represents the dark, hidden, unconscious side of our nature, ‘the shadow’ side of reality. It is a place of death and burial, and the Holy Birth in the cave is a foreshadowing of the saving death that will be accepted by Christ as He enters more and more into the world’s darkness. The cave is also a place of new life, the ‘tomb and womb’ paradox. As the earth offers Him a cave, so we must continue to offer up our ignorance, our darkness, our shadow self, and our need of illumination. [\[xxvi\]](#)

Scripture does not tell us that Jesus was born in a cave. This comes to us from sacred tradition. It shows the utter humility of God, who condescends to be born not in a palace as He deserves but in a cave as part of His total kenosis, or self-emptying in our behalf. “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor so that by His poverty, you might become rich” (St. Paul).

THE DARKNESS OF THE CAVE

The black darkness of the cave expresses the sin-darkened world into which Jesus was born. He came as the light of the world. Indeed, “those who sat in regions of darkness saw a great light.” “The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it” (John 1:5). Darkness is dispersed by the power of light, but until the final victory (the Second Coming), we will be living in a world where we will still experience darkness and will only realize our need for illumination in Him who comes to “transfer us from the kingdom of darkness into His marvelous light” (St. Peter). Thus, for some the open cave alludes to the death and Resurrection of Jesus.

The cave is a powerful expression of the darkness of sin and death wherein the Christ Child is portrayed as shining in the manger in all His glory. In this cave of our despair, He who is Truth takes on flesh from the Theotokos and enters the darkness to destroy it. “Our Savior, the dayspring from on high, has visited us, and we who were in shadow and in darkness have found the Truth” (A Nativity Troparion).

The cave of the Nativity still exists in Bethlehem today. Countless pilgrims have prayed there over the centuries. The Emperor Constantine transformed it into a chapel. A basilica was later built over the cave by the Emperor Justinian in the fifth century. It stands to this day.

Jim Forest sees social implications in the fact that Jesus was born in a cave and soon thereafter had to flee to Egypt as a refugee:

The iconographic portrayal of Christ’s birth is not without radical social implications. Christ’s birth occurred where it did, we are told by Matthew, “because there was no room in the inn.” He who welcomes all is himself unwelcome. From the moment of his birth, he is something like a refugee, as indeed he soon will be in the very strict sense of the word, fleeing to Egypt with Mary and Joseph, as they seek a safe distance from the murderous Herod. Later in life he will say to his followers, revealing one of the criteria of salvation, “I was homeless and you took me in.”^[xxvii]

Paul Evdokimov adds, “The black cave in which the Child lies represents hell. In order to triumph *mystically* over the Kingdom of Satan, Christ is born under the earth, at the very heart of the Fall. This deepens our understanding of Baptism: The baptized dies with Christ and *descends into hell* in order to rise again with Christ and enter the Kingdom here and now.”[\[xxviii\]](#)

THE STAR

Some believe that the wise men or magi who were led by a star to Bethlehem were actually astrologers since the religion of the East at that time was expressed in the study of the stars. So when God sent His only Son into the world, in His infinite mercy and wisdom, He made certain that the announcement of His birth also penetrated the depths of this false religion. God spoke to the followers of this pagan religion in their own terms, but He summoned them away from their religion and invited them to come and worship the Christ Child, the Morning Star, the Light of the World!

What did these wise men of the East do when they found the Christ Child in Bethlehem of Judea? “When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy; and going into the house they saw the child with Mary, His mother, and they fell down and worshipped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered Him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh” (Matt. 2:10-11). The magi abandoned the worship of the stars. They knelt down before Jesus and put away their false religion: astrology. We must realize that the actual visit of the magi, although depicted in the icon, did not occur until some time after the actual birth.

The *apolytikion* (dismissal) hymn of Christmas is in fact, as Fr. Hopko writes, “a polemic against the worship of the sun and the stars, calling for the adoration of Christ, the True Son of Righteousness (Malachi 4:2), who is Himself worshipped by all of the elements of nature.”

Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, has shone to the world the light of wisdom! For by it, those who worshipped the stars were taught by a star to worship Thee, the Sun of Righteousness and to know Thee, the Dayspring from on high (Luke 1:78). O Lord, glory to Thee. (Dismissal Hymn of the Nativity)

THREE RAYS OF LIGHT

The light from the star shines three rays of light upon the newly-born infant, witnessing to the fact that He is indeed the light of the world. Iconographers often omit or alter various details of the icon, but there is always a ray of light connecting heaven to the manger. Often there is a partially revealed circle at the very top of the ray symbolizing God the Father and a smaller circle within the ray, representing the Holy Spirit. Thus the Godhead is symbolized in the three rays of light that shine upon the Child in the manger: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, symbolizing the fullness of God in Trinity. The same threefold ray of light also shines upon Jesus in the icon of His baptism.

St. John Chrysostom believed that the star that appeared in the East was not a natural star but the Archangel Gabriel alerting the world to the birth of the Savior. Thus the star is considered not only a cosmic phenomenon, but also a messenger from above announcing the birth on earth of the Heavenly One.

THE OX AND THE DONKEY

The ox and the donkey gazing adoringly at the Infinite with wide open eyes serve to express the fulfillment of Isaiah's prophecy, "The ox knows his Master, and the donkey its master's crib, but Israel does not know, my people does not understand" (Isaiah 1:3). The ox and the donkey were among the first to witness the incarnation. It is interesting to note that these animals are never missing even from the earliest icons of the Nativity. It is for good reason that the Orthodox Church includes prayers for animals in its prayer books.

THE MAGI

The Adoration of the Magi or Wise Men, is an essential part of the Christmas scene. The Gospel reading at the divine liturgy on Christmas Day is Matthew's account of the Magi's visit to pay homage to Christ (Matt. 2:1-12). The Eastern Church considers the homage of the Magi an integral part of the Christmas celebration and not a separate commemoration on January 6, as in the West.

The Magi were considered to be the astrologers of the day who kept observing the stars. At that time astrology was regarded as a science. Today the science of astronomy has been separated from astrology, which is bound up with metaphysics and Satanism. Astrology has been rejected by the Orthodox Church.

THE SHEPHERDS

The magi were the three wise men who came from afar to pay homage to Christ. They represent the intellectual world beyond Judaism, the seekers, the pagan philosophers who sought and found the Messiah because they were seeking Him with an open *nous*, mind.

The shepherds, on the other hand, were the simple people who were summoned by the angels to Bethlehem. They were the ones to whom the angels first announced the birth of the Messiah. They were the only ones who heard the choirs of angels. They were the first sons of Israel to worship the babe. They were first to respond to the gospel by coming to the manger to adore Him. As Jim Forest notes, for them, God was not “buried in footnotes.” Some icons show one shepherd playing a reed-pipe, thus adding a human art—music—to the angelic choir.

Ouspensky and Lossky see two separate worlds in the magi and the shepherds:

In the shepherds, the first sons of Israel to worship the Babe, the Church sees the beginning of the Jewish Church, and in the wise men “the beginning of the nations”—the Church of the heathen. On one side are the shepherds—simple unsophisticated men, with whom the world on high enters into communication directly amid their everyday working life; on the other side are the wise men—the men of learning—who have to accomplish a long journey from the knowledge of what is relative to the knowledge of what is absolute. [\[xxix\]](#)

The Church accepts both the shepherds and the wise men, and both come to the manger to adore the Christ Child as the Kontakion of the Nativity testifies,

Today the Virgin gives birth to Him who is above all being, and the earth offers a cave to Him whom no man can approach. Angels with shepherds give glory, and Magi journey with a star. For unto us is born a young Child, the pre-eternal God.

THE SWADDLING CLOTHES

The swaddling clothes on the infant Jesus serve to establish a link between birth and death, reminding us of the burial garments of Lazarus. We see similar bands of cloth in icons of Christ's burial. St. Ephraim the Syrian (306-373) expresses the view that Jesus had to take on human flesh in order to be able to get into Hades to release the dead:

And because Death was not able to devour Him without the body, nor Sheol to swallow Him up without the flesh, He came unto the virgin, that from thence He might obtain that which should bear Him to Sheol With the body then that [was] from the Virgin, He entered Sheol and plundered its storehouses and emptied its treasures.

Jim Forest writes that "in the Nativity icon, the manger looks much like a coffin. In this way, the icon links birth and death. The Poet Rilke says we bear our death within us from the moment of birth. The icon of the Nativity does the same."[\[xxx\]](#)

The swaddling clothes are mentioned in Scripture. The Gospel of Luke specifically states, "And she brought forth her first son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7).

The swaddling clothes represent also the complete submission of the all-powerful, infinite God to the physical limitations governing the human race. Thus, cave, manger, and swaddling clothes represent the awesome kenosis (self-emptying) of the Godhead in the Incarnation. In the words of Frederick Beuchner, "He who dwells in unapproachable light chose to come to us in diapers."

THE ANGELS

The Angels appeared at Bethlehem to announce the birth of the Savior. They appeared not to the scribes, the Pharisees, and the high priests who represented the religious establishment of the times; neither did they appear to the magi or wise men, but only to the simple shepherds. They sang, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace, good will toward men." The peace they proclaimed was not a social peace, the absence of war, but the true peace that comes from the Incarnation and presence of Christ, a peace with God, neighbor, and one's self.

The angels perform a two-fold purpose: they glorify God and bring good news to the shepherds. In the icon, some angels are pictured as looking up as they glorify God and others look downwards towards the shepherds, to whom they announce good tidings.

BETHLEHEM: THE HOUSE OF BREAD

The setting of the Nativity icon is wilderness. In this wilderness the children of Israel are nourished by manna given by God (Exodus 16). In the icon, the empty wilderness offers us Him who is in the manger—the bread of life, the true bread from heaven, who continues to offer Himself to us as manna in every Eucharist.

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh (John 6:48-51).

It was predicted in the Old Testament that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem, which means the house of bread:

But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
Are not the least among the rulers of Judah;
For out of you shall come a Ruler
Who will shepherd My people Israel. —**Matt.2:6**

The Nativity icon serves to remind Orthodox Christians that Jesus continues to be for us the bread of life whom we receive in the real manger—our soul—when we partake of the holy Eucharist.

The One who fed His people manna from heaven in the wilderness now becomes manna Himself and offers Himself to the world as the bread of life—the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. Placed on the altar, He is offered to us for the forgiveness of sins and unto life eternal. Thus Christmas happens in every liturgy where Jesus comes to be born in the manger of our soul.

THE THEOTOKOS

Jim Forest sees a great contrast between the Nativity icon and the Christmas representations of Western art:

The Nativity icon is in sharp contrast to the sentimental imagery we are used to in western Christmas art. In the icon there is no charming Bethlehem bathed in the light of the nativity star but only a rugged mountain with a few plants. The austere mountain suggests a hard, unwelcoming world in which survival is a real battle—the world since our expulsion from Paradise. The most prominent figure in the icon is Mary, framed by the red blanket she is resting on—red: the color of life, the color of blood. [\[xxxii\]](#)

Ouspensky and Lossky show profound insight in their analysis of the figure of the Theotokos in the Nativity icon:

Looking at the icon of the Nativity of Christ, the first thing that draws our attention is the position of the Mother of God and the place she occupies. In this “festival of recreation” she is “the renewal of all born on earth,” the new Eve. As the first Eve became the mother of all living people, so the new Eve became the Mother of all renewed mankind, deified through the Incarnation of the Son of God. She is the highest thanksgiving to God, which man, from among all created beings, brings to the Creator. By this offering in the person of the Mother of God, fallen mankind gives assent to its salvation through the Incarnation of God. The icon of the Nativity graphically underlines this role of the Mother of God, singling her out from among the other figures by her central position and at times by her size. She is lying immediately beside the Babe, but usually already outside the cave, on a bed, of a kind such as the Jews carried with them on their travels. [\[xxxii\]](#)

Note that the Theotokos is portrayed as lying down to show that Jesus was begotten in a human way, to avert suspicion that the incarnation was an illusion.

Mary is shown gazing toward the bewildered Joseph, who is shown being tempted by the devil, who tells him that if Jesus were indeed the Son of God, the birth would not have occurred in this very human way. Mary’s gaze is intended

to reassure Joseph that all this has happened according to God's plan. So concerned is the Theotokos with Joseph's doubt that she takes her eyes off the Child as she prays for her spouse. Imagine how she must feel about us in today's unbelieving world where even so-called "Christian" churches deny the divinity of her Son, rejecting the Resurrection, His miracles, and most of what He said. It must be a sword that continues to penetrate the heart of the Theotokos.

There are many liturgical texts (hymns) in the Forefeast of the Nativity that focus on the doubts and dilemma of Joseph:

Joseph spoke thus to the Virgin: "What is this doing, O Mary, that I see in thee? I fail to understand and am amazed, and my mind is struck with dismay. Go from my sight, therefore, with all speed. What is this doing, O Mary, that I see in thee? Instead of honour, thou hast brought me shame; instead of gladness, sorrow; instead of praise, reproof. No further shall I bear the reproach of men. I received thee from the priests of the temple, as one blameless before the Lord. And what is that I now see? (Stikheron from the First Hour on Christmas Eve)

O Virgin, when Joseph went up to Bethlehem wounded by sorrow, thou didst cry to Him: "Why art thou downcast and troubled, seeing me great with child? Why art thou wholly ignorant of the fearful mystery that comes to pass in me? Henceforth, cast every fear aside and understand this strange marvel: for in my womb God now descends upon earth for mercy's sake, and He has taken flesh. Thou shalt see Him according to His good pleasure, when He is born; and filled with joy thou shalt worship Him as thy Creator. Him the angels praise without ceasing in song and glorify with the Father and the Holy Spirit." (Stikheron from the Ninth Hour of Christmas Eve)

THE LOWEST LEVEL OF THE ICON

The lower scenes on the icon underline the scandal of the Incarnation and are based on tradition. The right-hand scene shows the washing of the Infant by the midwife and her assistant. It tells us that Jesus was born like every other child. The scene on the left portrays Joseph, who, having observed the washing of the Infant, is once again assailed by doubts as to the virginity of his spouse. He is being tempted by the devil. The Theotokos in the center of the icon looks at Joseph from her reclining position as if trying to overcome his doubts. This is intended to show the difficulty in accepting that which is beyond words or reason—the Incarnation of God.

Despite his doubts, Joseph remained faithful to his spouse and the Christ-Child, serving as their faithful guardian, as they fled to Egypt together to escape Herod's slaughter of the innocents. For this, Joseph is commemorated annually on the first Sunday after Christmas.

The scene of the washing of the Infant by the midwives is sometimes omitted from the Nativity icon for three reasons: 1. Based on the Apocryphal Gospels of James and John, it is not Scriptural. 2. Some feel that the All-Pure Infant was exactly that, all-pure, and did not need to be washed. 3. The Theotokos gave birth in a manner altogether transcending the order of nature and without any pains. Hence she needed no assistance from a midwife. The practice of omitting the washing scene holds true, for example, in some monasteries of Mount Athos.

ALL CREATION SHARES IN THE JOY

The Nativity icon shows all creation sharing in the joy and giving thanks in its own way as it welcomes and seeks to cooperate with the self-emptying love of God. This is superbly expressed by the following Nativity hymn:

What shall we offer Thee, O Christ, who for our sakes hast appeared on earth as man? Every creature made by Thee offers Thee thanks. The angels offer Thee a hymn; the heavens, a star; the Magi, gifts; the shepherds, their wonder; the earth, its cave; the wilderness, the manger: and we offer Thee a Virgin Mother. O pre-eternal God, have mercy upon us. (Stikheron from the Nativity Vespers)

St. Ambrose expressed the awesome meaning of the Incarnation, summarizing the meaning of the icon:

He was wrapped in swaddling clothes, so that you may be freed from the snares of death. He was on earth so that you may be in the stars. There was no place for Him in the inn, so that you may have mansions in heaven. Though rich, He became poor for your sake, so that by His poverty you might be rich.... You see He is in swaddling clothes. You do not see that He is in heaven. You hear the cries of an infant, but you do not hear the lowing of an ox recognizing its master, for the ox knows its owner and the donkey his master's crib. —St. Ambrose

CHAPTER FIVE

ICONS OF THE THEOTOKOS

The icon of the virgin holding the Child Jesus is the icon of the Incarnation, the communion of the divine and the human, which is the very essence of the Church. —**Paul Evdokimov**

- A. The SweetKissing Icon (Glykofilousa)
- B. Eleousa or Vladimir Icon (the Icon of Tenderness)
- C. The Icon of the Sign (Platytera)
- D. The Icon of the Way (Hodigitria)
- E. The Orant Icon of the Theotokos

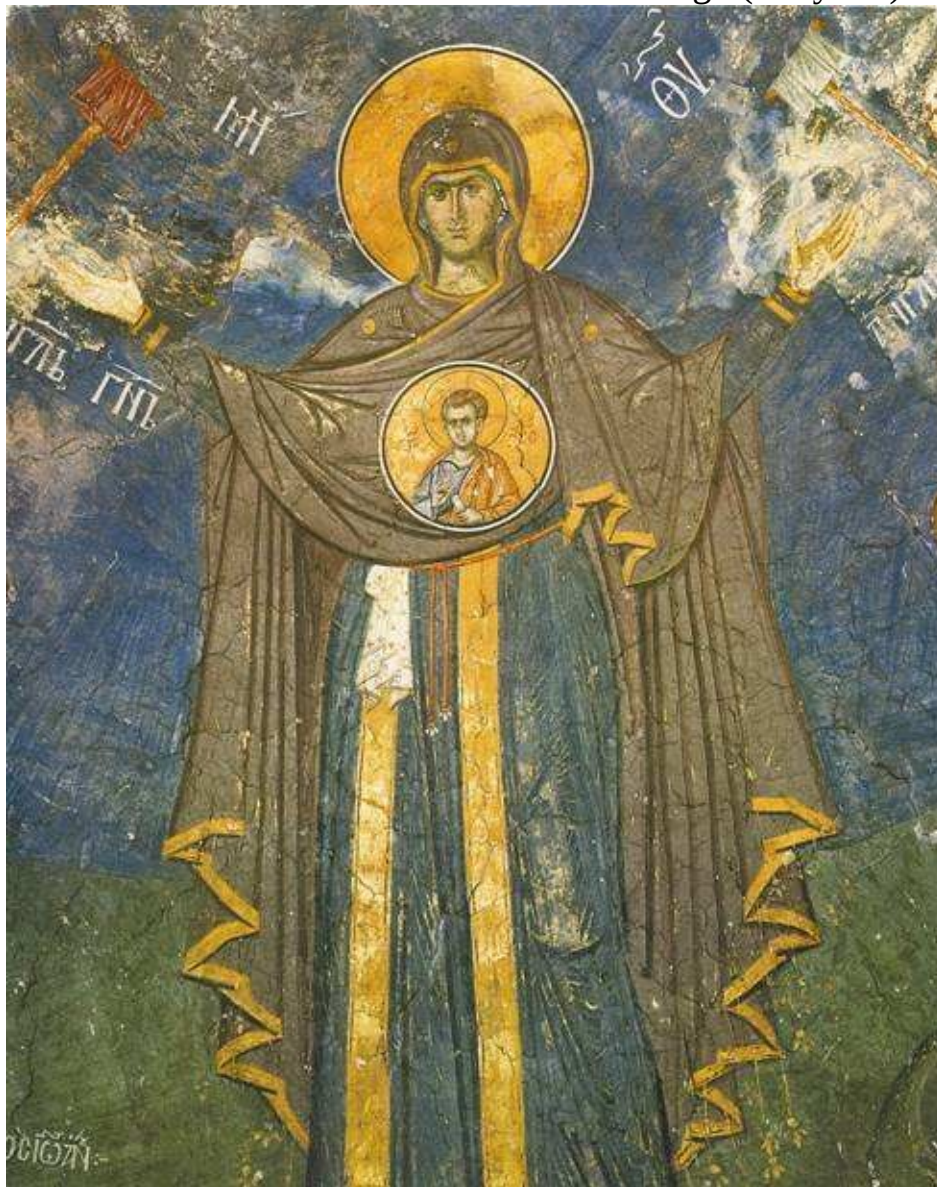
The SweetKissing Icon (Glykofilousa)



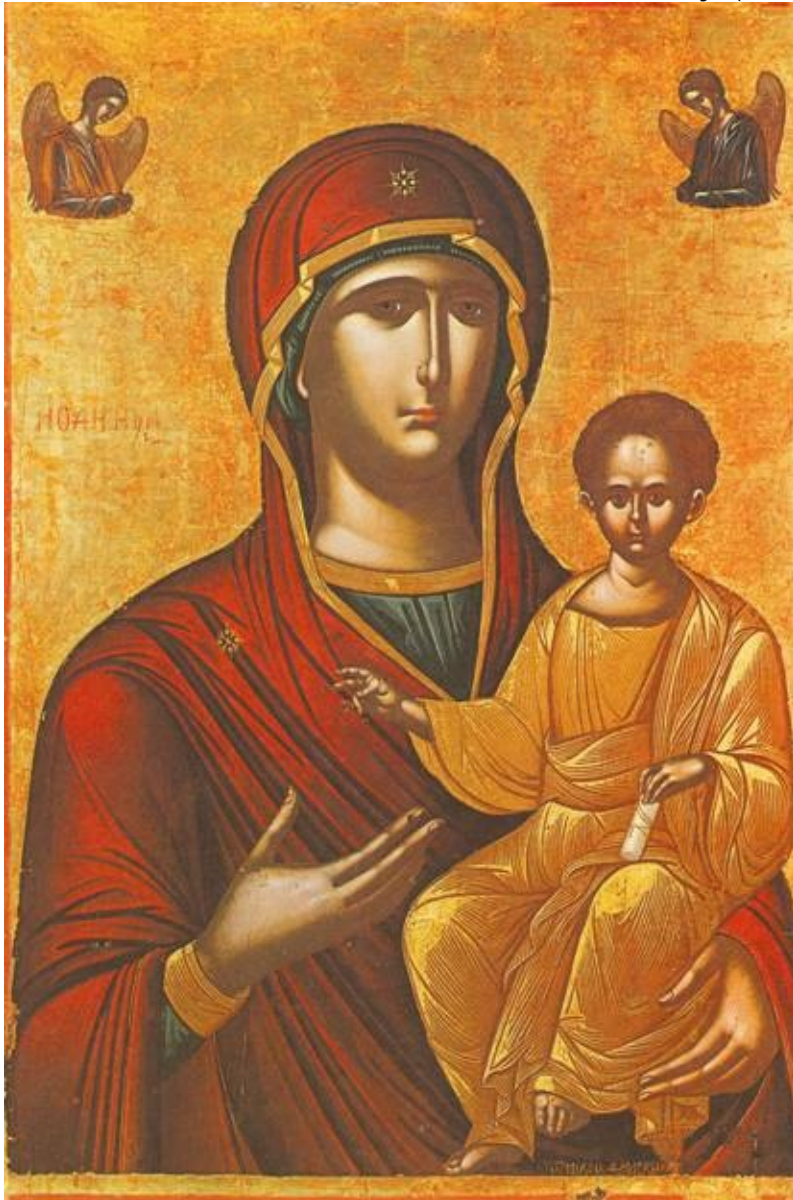
Eleousa or Vladimir Icon (the Icon of Tenderness)



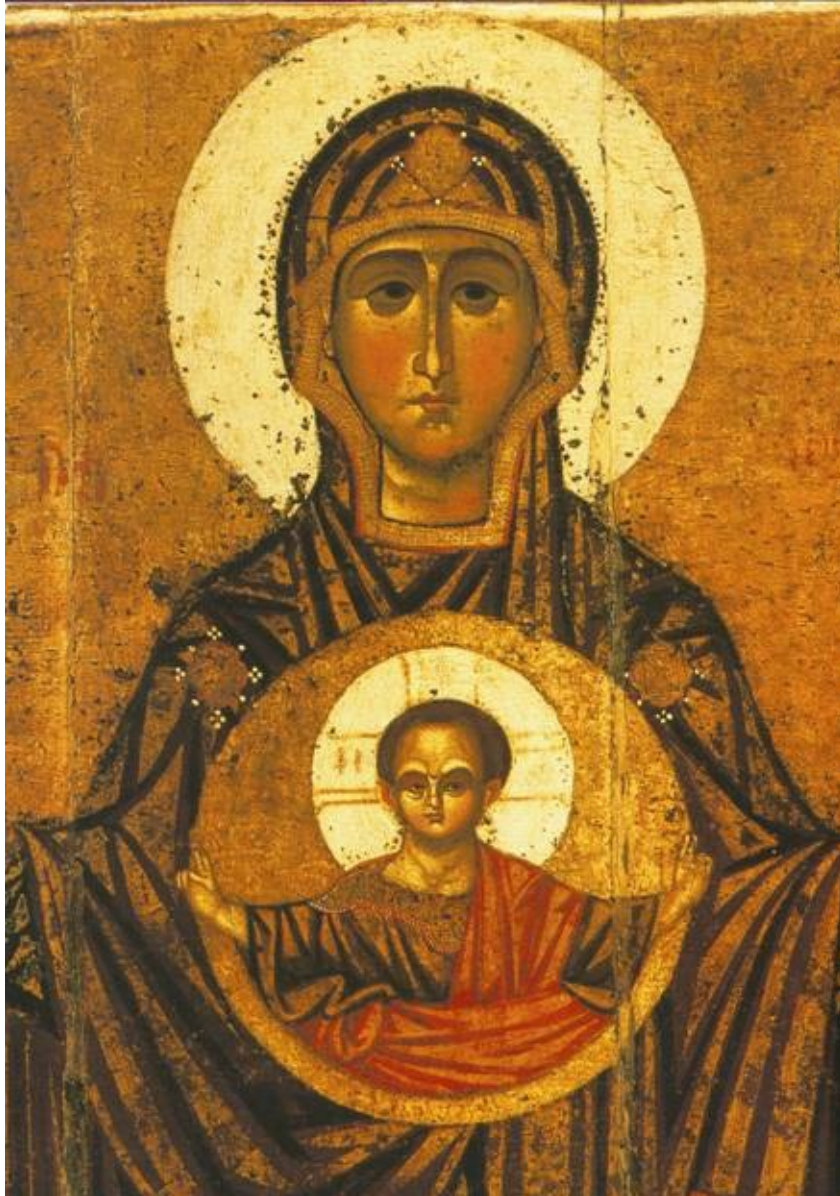
The Icon of the Sign (Platytera)



The Icon of the Way (Hodigitria)



The Orant Icon of the Theotokos



A. THE SWEET-KISSING ICON OF THE THEOTOKOS (GLYKOFILOUSA) SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

There are several icons of the Theotokos in the Orthodox tradition. Of these we shall study the five main ones. The first of these is the SweetKissing (Glykofilousa) icon.

This is one of the most beautiful icons of the Theotokos. In this icon the baby Jesus, resting in Mary's bosom looks up to His mother's face with a look of the most tender adoration and love ever witnessed anywhere. With her open hand, Mary points to Jesus as she gestures to us, gently inviting us to move closer to Jesus, to find in Him the God to whom we belong; the One who created us and redeemed us; the One who loves us with an everlasting love; the One in whom we "live and move and have our being." Her hand points to Jesus as she gestures to us, gently inviting us to *move closer to Jesus*. As she points to Jesus, she seems to be saying the words she spoke to the servants at the wedding in Cana, "Do whatever He tells you."

THE HAND OF MARY

The hand of Mary which occupies the center and heart of the icon is indescribably beautiful. It summarizes the entire icon as it simply offers the Child as the Savior of the world to all who are open to seeing Jesus with the eyes of faith. Mary's hand is open as it calls on us to open a space for Jesus in our hearts and to approach Him constantly in prayer as in the Eucharist, "with the fear of God, with faith and with love." Mary's beautiful hand, stretched out toward her Son, turns the whole icon into an expression of Mary's beautiful song of praise in Luke 1:46-47 where she sings, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit exults in God my Savior." It is as if her hand, pointing to Jesus, is an invitation for us to worship her Son, saying, "*Praise* Jesus, *thank* Jesus, *glorify* Jesus, *ask* from Jesus, *plead* with Jesus, and always, always, *pray* to Jesus." He is more tender, more compassionate, more approachable than all of the saints put together. He is your Savior. He is your Lord. He is your God. Come to Him. Praise Him. Love Him. Obey Him. Receive Him. Glorify Him! For, to as many "as received Him, He gave power to become children of God." The Theotokos should never be placed above her Son. She is never pleased when this happens. As the instrument of God's incarnation, her purpose is to lead us to her Son.

MOVE CLOSER TO JESUS

As the Theotokos is close to Jesus, who is resting in her bosom, so she keeps trying to move us closer to Jesus, as if saying, “I am here only to lead you to Jesus.” “Do whatever He tells you.” Mary wants us to let go of our fears, and to trust—as she did—that all the promises of God are fulfilled in Jesus (Lk. 1:45). The tender embrace of mother and child is far from just a sentimental event. It portrays the mysteriously beautiful closeness between God and us made possible by the coming of Jesus. Literally, Jesus came that we might rest in His bosom exactly as the Apostle John did at the Last Supper. That is where we belong. That is where Jesus wants us to be—in His bosom. This is where He is constantly inviting us to come.

HOW CLOSE?

To help us understand how close God wants us to be to Jesus, read John 1:18 where the Apostle John writes about Jesus: “*No one has ever seen God: only the Son, Who is in the bosom of the Father, He has made Him known*” (Jn. 1:18). The very intimate, personal, and loving relationship between God the Father and God the Son is captured by this beautiful expression: that Jesus lies “*in the bosom of the Father.*” That disciple “whom Jesus loved” was John. The intimate relationship of love that exists between the Father and the Son in the Holy Trinity is now replicated between God in the person of Jesus and one of us, represented by the Apostle John, who lies in His bosom. Jesus wants each one of us to be in as close a relationship to Him as He is to the Father. As Jesus is “*in the bosom of the Father,*” so God the Father wants us—you and me—to be “*in the bosom of Jesus.*” It is to this kind of tender, loving, personal, intimate relationship with God that God invites us through prayer, through repentance, through the Eucharist, and through His word. The disciple “whom Jesus loves” is not only John, but each one of us. This position “in the bosom of Jesus” is reserved not only for John but also for you and for me as we grow in our faith, obedience, and love for Jesus. One cannot get closer to God than to be in His bosom.

THE FACE OF THE THEOTOKOS

As one studies an icon of the Theotokos, one sees how the expression of the soul is concentrated on the face. It is often said that the face is the mirror of the soul. The interest of the onlooker is withdrawn from the body and focused on the face and especially the eyes. Here are expressed the virtues of meekness, humility, purity, spiritual love, and wisdom.

The icon of the Virgin with Child is an image of the Incarnation. If one looks attentively at the icon, one will see that the Mother of God, holding the Child, never looks at the Child. She looks neither at the viewer nor into the distance but her open eyes look deep inside her. She is contemplating the mystery of the God who became man in her. St. Luke explains this contemplative look on Mary's face: "But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:19). Her tenderness is expressed with the shyness of her hands. She holds the Child without hugging him. She holds the Child as one would hold something sacred. All the tenderness, all the human love is expressed by the Child, not the Mother. She remains the Mother of God, and she treats the Child, not as the Baby Jesus, but as the Incarnate Son of God. He in turn expresses to her all the love and tenderness of man and God to a person who is both His mother and His creature.

THE THEOTOKOS AND THE INCARNATION

Among all the saints, the Orthodox Church reserves a special position of honor for the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is venerated as the most exalted among God's creatures, "more honorable than the cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the seraphim." The titles given to Mary by the Orthodox Church: *Theotokos* (Mother of God), *Aeiparthenos* (Ever-Virgin), and *Panayia* (All-Holy) serve a theological purpose. Far from elevating her to a position as a fourth person of the Trinity, such titles seek to protect and proclaim the correct doctrine of Christ's Person. The Mother is venerated because of the Son and never apart from Him. Too often a refusal to honor the Theotokos goes hand in hand with an incomplete faith in the incarnation, i.e., the mystery of God becoming man in the Person of Jesus.

St. John of Damascus noted, "Only the name of the Theotokos contains all the economy of salvation." The name Theotokos was given to Mary not because of any inclination to "Mariolatry." Its significance is wholly Christological. She was called Theotokos to affirm that Christ, born of her, was true God as well as true man, that He was not a man who later attained divinity, like the demi-gods of the pagans. If Christ was truly God as well as man, His Mother was also truly the Mother of God. Mary's womb was prepared to be Christ's tabernacle, the very dwelling place of God.

VENERATION

Orthodox Christians do not *worship* the Theotokos and the saints; rather they *venerate* them. God alone is worshipped. Anyone who claims that the Orthodox worship saints is guilty of bearing false witness against one's neighbor since we clearly do not believe this. The saints are revered as reflections of the Christ image. It is God who is glorified through His saints. They are praised for what God has done in and through them. Reverence for saints is enhanced through the use and veneration of icons which are ever-present in Orthodox churches and homes. The icon becomes a meeting place, an existential encounter, a window through which we look on the saints not as shadowy figures from a remote past but as contemporary brothers and sisters in Christ, members of the same household of God. We feel free to call on them through prayer for family support as they intercede to God for us.

“CALLING TO REMEMBRANCE”

More than once during the liturgy the priest or deacon calls on us to pray with the exhortation: “Calling to remembrance our most holy, pure, blessed and glorified Lady, Theotokos and ever-Virgin Mary together with all the saints, let us commit ourselves and each other and our whole life to Christ our God.” Here we see clearly that the purpose of bringing to mind the Theotokos and all the saints is to lead us to a deeper commitment “to Christ our God.” The focus is not on the saints but on Christ. After we have remembered the saints, we move on “to commit ourselves and each other and our whole life to Christ our God.” Having fixed our gaze on others in the family of God who have rendered perfect service to His excellent glory, we are properly inspired to offer ourselves in total surrender and commitment to Christ, our Lord.

HER WHOLE PURPOSE IS TO LEAD US TO HER SON

Summarizing what the Orthodox Church believes about the Theotokos, we may say that the Virgin sits in the first pew leading us in prayer to her Son. Her whole life and purpose are simply to bring us to Him. In the words of the Greek Orthodox theologian, Dr. N.A. Nissiotis:

As shown in the icon, Mary is never alone but always with Christ. Thus prayer to her is the prayer of the Church with her to the incarnate Son. One should rather see in Mary, the “Most Holy”(Panayia), the first and fullest of the saints, leading them in a continuous intercession to her Son. The worshipping Church is not praying to the “Theotokos” but praying with her to God. She is the animating power, the leader of this continuous intercession of the Community of Saints to the Trinitarian God. [\[xxxiii\]](#)

The Orthodox liturgy specifically states this when it calls on us to pray: “Through the prayers of the Theotokos, Savior, save us.”

THE TABLES ARE TURNED

In heaven, of course, the tables are turned. Mary the Theotokos rests in the bosom of Jesus, along with the Apostle John and all the saints. In the icon of the Falling Asleep of Mary, we see Jesus carrying the soul of Mary to heaven in His bosom. If we move closer to Jesus now through prayer, daily repentance, through the Eucharist, by ministering to the poor, and by loving and forgiving our neighbor—even our enemy—then we are always in His embrace. On the final day we shall *experience* that embrace in the bosom of Jesus personally and existentially.

The *Glykofilousa*—Sweet Kissing—icon does not consist only of Mary loving Jesus; it is even more so, Jesus sweetly kissing and loving His mother, and through her each one of us. When we enter this world, there is a mother's bosom waiting to embrace us in love. When we leave this world, there will be another embrace waiting in the bosom of Jesus for those who love and serve Him.

In adoring the humanity of Christ, we venerate his mother, from whom he received that humanity and who, in her person, represents the whole of humanity. (Fr. Sergius Bulgakov)

B. THE ELEOUSA ICON OF THE THEOTOKOS (MOTHER OF GOD OF VLADIMIR) SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

The first icon of the Theotokos that we studied was the Sweet Kissing (Glykofilousa) icon.

The second classic icon of the Theotokos which expresses the incredibly personal love God has for His children is the icon of the *Eleousa*, the Merciful One, also known as the Vladimir Icon or the Icon of Tenderness.

Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, has analyzed the *Eleousa* icon in a most profound manner. In fact, Bishop Kallistos Ware comments in the Foreword to Rowan's book, "Speaking of Icons thoroughly familiar to me, he succeeded in revealing within them spiritual meanings of which I had never been previously aware. He possesses to an unusual degree the gift of creative imagination."

Here is how Archbishop Rowan describes the *Eleousa* or Vladimir Icon:

The Eleousa pattern is best known to Westerners through the great twelfth-century icon of the "Mother of God of Vladimir": the Child Christ embraces Mary, cheek to cheek, his arm encircles her neck, one foot is thrust towards us as if he is pushing himself up against her body with great energy, and his right hand grasps the corner of her veil. In some later versions, especially in Russia, he has one hand fondling her chin.... If we begin, as most of us tend to, with a notion that God stands at a distance waiting for us to make a move in his direction, this image should give us something of a shock. The Lord here does not wait, impassive, as we babble on about our shame and penitence, trying to persuade him that we are worth forgiving. His love is instead that of an eager and rather boisterous child, scrambling up on his mother's lap, seizing handfuls of her clothing and nuzzling his face against hers, with that extraordinary hunger for sheer physical closeness that children will show with loving parents. Instead of the effort to bridge the enormous gap between here and there, between God and my sinful self, we have a movement—direct, intimate, overwhelming, even embarrassing—from God to us, just as we might want to say to a child, "Calm down," as it pushes at us or grabs clothes and hair, so we can imagine Mary in this image half-embarrassed by the urgency and overexcitement of the child.

Behind the stately postures of the icon, we can see something intensely, untidily human.

This is a child who cannot bear to be separated from his mother. We have seen that God is not ashamed to be our God, to be identified as the one who is involved with us; here, though, it is as if he is not merely unashamed but positively shameless in his eagerness, longing to embrace and to be embraced. It is not simply that God will deign not to mind our company; rather he is passionate for it. The image of God's action we are presented with here is of a hungry love. [\[xxxiv\]](#)

If icons are theology in color, then the Eleousa or Vladimir icon speaks much more powerfully than words ever can about the relationship of "hungry love" that God has for each one of us.

THE VLADIMIR ICON

The Vladimir icon is one of several icons attributed by tradition to the writer of the Gospel of Luke. It is established historically that in the year 1155, this icon was given by the Church in Constantinople to the Russian Church which was then centered in Kiev. Years later, it was moved north to the cathedral in Vladimir, then the main city in Russia. Ever since then, the icon has carried the name of Vladimir. Years later it was moved to what became the chief city of Russia—Moscow.

The icon is now regarded as Russia's greatest national treasure. At present it is enclosed in a case of thick glass in Moscow's Tretyakov Gallery where people come to pray before it and where the museum staff places fresh flowers before it each day.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF THE VLADIMIR ICON

Distinctive features of the Vladimir icon include Christ's bare feet that bring home the fact of His physical incarnation. He walked the earth and left footprints. An additional distinctive prototype is the arm of the Child around His mother's neck. Unlike Western presentations of the Christ Child, icons of the Child in the East depict Jesus with an infant's body but with an adult-sized head and other adult features designed to express the fact that the face pressed against His mother's cheek is that of the timeless Son of God.

THE ORNATE STARS

The ornate stars prominently displayed on Mary's veil and shawl proclaim Christ's virgin birth. Paul Evdokimov explains:

In her icons, the Virgin bears upon her head and shoulders three stars which attest to her virginity ante partum, in partu et post partum—before, during and after birth. The Eastern Church exhibits the greatest sobriety and reserve which prohibit physiological questions about her virginity, a curiosity completely inappropriate to such a mystery. Mary's virginity means, as she herself witnesses, that she “did not at all know man.” It is essential to note that virginity is not so much a state but the very essence of Mary's being as the “new creature,” “the boundary of the created and the uncreated,” in the words of St. Gregory Palamas, in which the created is totally deified. Mary's physiological structure is that of a creature of the “new creation,” one which transcends the fallen human order and thus every question of “how” is completely surpassed and cannot be asked. [\[xxxv\]](#)

HIS TENDER EMBRACE

Christ's tender embrace of His mother expresses His tender embrace of all of us, His children, beginning with His mother. While the gold of Christ's robe proclaims His divinity, His mother's somber, earth hued clothing recalls seeds of mourning as the Theotokos foresees the sword that will most certainly pierce her heart. She supports the child's weight with her right hand, but her left hand seems hardly to touch Him, as if she is not holding onto Him but presenting Him to the world, saying, "Behold the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world." Jesus' eyes are fixed upon His mother, but her meditative gaze is beyond the viewer as if transfixed on the mystery God is bringing about through her.

It is worthy to note that of the twelve major feast days in the Orthodox Church calendar, five are dedicated to the Virgin: the Virgin's birth, the Virgin's Presentation at the Temple, the Annunciation, the Dormition of the Virgin, and the Protection of the Veil. During these feast days, innumerable requests for prayer are addressed to her. Her name is constantly invoked during services, along with that of her Son.

HISTORY OF THE VLADIMIR ICON

The Vladimir icon was painted in Constantinople at the end of the 11th century and has spent most of its thousand years of existence in Russia. The compositional style on which the Vladimir icon is based is known as the icon of Loving Kindness, a translation of the Greek Eleousa, which carries connotations of mercy, compassion, pity, and tenderness. The icon was brought to Kiev from Constantinople in the 12th century. It was then taken to the city of Vladimir (from which it derived its name). It left Vladimir and was taken to Moscow for good in 1395.

In 1395, Tamerlane, the great Central Asiatic conqueror, was nearing the city of Moscow with his invincible hordes. The Grand Prince of Muscovy, Vasilii I, sent for the Vladimir Theotokos icon as the last hope for the Muscovites. The icon's journey lasted ten days; the roads by which it made its way to the capital city were lined with people on their knees praying, "O Mother of God, save the Russian land!" The grand duke, his family, and his court met the icon several miles before the city gates and accompanied it on foot, with a full church procession to the Dormition Cathedral in the Kremlin.

It is said that that very night Tamerlane had a dream in which a woman clothed in the sun appeared to him, accompanied by an army of winged angels carrying golden spears. The next day, Tamerlane's wise counselors interpreted the dream to mean that the divine intercessor for the Russians before the throne of God, the mother of the Christian God, had appeared to the Asian military leader. Tamerlane immediately gave the order to sound the retreat, since he could not hope to be victorious over the queen of Heaven. Moscow was saved.

During Napoleon's invasion of Russia, in 1812, the Vladimir icon was carried out to the troops in order to strengthen their morale. This took place on the eve of the battle of Borodino, which proved crucial in the eventual defeat of Napoleon. Once again tens of thousands of soldiers knelt alongside the road when the icon passed on its way to a church service in the field attended by Emperor Alexander I and Field Marshall Kutuzov, the Russian commander-in-chief.

The icon remained in the Dormition Cathedral in Moscow until the

revolution of 1917, at which time it was placed in the Tretyakov Art Gallery.

Leonid Ouspensky, theologian and art historian, has written much about the Loving Kindness Theotokos exemplified by the Vladimir Mother of God. He explains that she is the most striking example of the fact that every human feeling expressed in an icon acquires its full meaning through its contact with divine grace. The empathy of motherhood—the most instinctive part of human nature—becomes transfigured through this icon into compassion for all creation. The Vladimir icon has often been called the Eucharistic icon, since in receiving the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, we too are enabled to hold on to Christ and be held by Him in His bosom.

She [the Theotokos] is the summit and completion of every saint. —**St. Gregory Palamas**

C. THE THEOTOKOS ICON OF THE SIGN SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

Our Orthodox Christian faith is written on the very walls of our churches. The architecture of our churches and the arrangement of the icons bear witness to and express our faith. For example, at the highest point of the church, i.e., the top of the dome, there is an icon of Christ Pantocrator—the Ruler and Redeemer of the universe.

THE PLATYTERA OR ICON OF THE SIGN

Next to the Pantocrator on the ceiling, the first icon we usually see in an Orthodox church is on the front wall. It is called the icon of the Theotokos of the Sign. It is called the Icon of the Sign because of the Prophet Isaiah's words, "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold a virgin will conceive and bear a Son and shall call him Emmanuel." This icon dates to the fourth century and portrays the infant Jesus *while still in His mother's womb*. This is done artistically by creating a rondel or mandorla within which is placed as an image of the still unborn Infant with an adult face to show that He is ruler of the cosmos. This icon expresses the Church's reverence for life from its earliest stages (conception). It explains why the Church from the very beginning has condemned abortion as murder.

Professor Soteriou describes the Icon of the Platytera as follows:

During the Byzantine period, the allegorical meaning of the apse as a point uniting the roof of the church with the floor, and symbolically heaven with the earth, contributed to the placing of the icon of the Theotokos as Platytera. The Theotokos hovers as it were between heaven and earth, as "the heavenly Ladder, whereby God has descended," and "the Bridge leading those of earth to heaven." (The symbolism is taken from the Akathistos Hymn.) She is chiefly represented as praying before the Pantocrator in the dome, but also as holding the Child. [\[xxxvi\]](#)

WHAT THIS ICON SAYS ABOUT ABORTIONS

The opening verses of Jeremiah contain an announcement of God to the prophet that He had chosen Jeremiah for His work before his birth: “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations” (Jer. 1:5). In Galatians 1:15, the Apostle Paul also expresses the belief that God had set him apart before he was born.

The Bible is filled with reverence for human life, even before such life is born. In Ecclesiastes 11:5 we read, “As you do not know how the spirit comes to the bones in the womb of a woman with child, so you do not know the work of God who makes everything.”

In Isaiah 44:2 we read, “Thus says the LORD who made you, who formed you from the womb and will help you.”

In all these verses, and many more, we see that man from the very moment of his conception is known, loved, and cared for by God. A developing fetus is human life, and human life, at whatever stage, is life that is surrounded by the protecting care of God. Those who wantonly destroy such life are guilty of a crime no matter what the Supreme Court of the United States says. Orthodox Christians look at life in the light of a much higher authority. And that is the authority of the Word of God, the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ and His Church. In the first century **The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles**, an Apostolic document, commanded, “Do not murder; do not commit adultery....do not kill a fetus by abortion or commit infanticide.”

The fetus is a person, not a tooth to be removed at will. Justice White wrote in his dissenting opinion to the Supreme Court decision on abortion, “The Court for the most part...values the convenience, whim, or caprice of the...mother more than the life or potential life of the fetus....”

The Orthodox Church celebrates the “conception” of both John the Baptist and Jesus on its church calendar. What is this but an acknowledgement of the fact that the human being exists from the moment of conception? At this point, the life of the unborn infant belongs neither to the mother nor to the father but to

God!

Picture this! Overpopulation, no housing, no money, the father is unknown.
Should this woman have an abortion? If she did, she would have killed Christ.

OUR PURPOSE IN LIFE

The Icon of the Sign on the front wall of the church reminds us that our purpose in life is to “put on Christ,” to allow Jesus to be born in us, as he was born in the Theotokos. This wall painting is also called the Platytera, i.e., she who is “more spacious than the heavens” since she bore the God-man. It calls on us to heed the words of St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me.” It reminds the worshipper that our primary purpose as Christians is to “put on Christ.”

THE THEOTOKOS AS PROTOTYPE

Mary is a prototype, an example for all of us. She was the first among us humans to welcome Christ into her heart and womb. She adorns the front wall of the church because she is the instrument through whom the Holy Spirit effected the incarnation. She stands there on the front wall to remind worshippers that the purpose of life is to accept Jesus as Lord, to allow Him to be born in us that, we, too, like her, may become God-bearers to the point where we can say with St. Paul, "It is not I who live but Christ who lives in me. The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave Himself for me." The Theotokos is the personification of human sanctity.

THE THEOTOKOS PRAYS FOR US: JESUS SAVES US.

One thing we must always remember about the Theotokos is that we do not worship her. That is *not* why she is on the front wall of the church. She is one of us. In the words of Dr. Nikos Nissiotis, the Theotokos is like a choir director leading us in our prayers to her Son. We do not pray *to* the Theotokos. We ask her to intercede, to pray *for* us. She leads us in our prayers to her Son. As we pray in the liturgy: “Through the prayers of the Theotokos, *Savior save us.*” The Theotokos prays. Jesus saves. We do not have two Saviors—only one. “Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

When Mary is praised in the Gospel for having given birth and nursed Jesus, Christ responds with an important statement, “Rather blessed are they who hear the Word of God and keep it.” The Theotokos is praised by Jesus not for having given birth to Jesus but for keeping His word and urging us to “do whatever He tells you” (Cana).

The Orthodox Church believes that she from whom God took flesh was also first to share in Christification or theosis, in keeping with what St. Athanasius wrote, “The Son of God became man that we might become god.”

D. THE ICON OF THE WAY (HODIGITRIA) SPEAKS TO US: ITS MESSAGE

The next icon of the Theotokos that is considered a classic is the Icon of the Way, (*Hodigitria*, in Greek), the original of which was painted by St. Luke according to tradition. St. Luke is the Gospel writer who gives us the most information about Mary. The original *Hodigitria* icon was brought to Constantinople from Jerusalem in the fifth century where it was placed in the Hodegon Monastery and came to be venerated as the city's defender.

The icon depicts Mary serving as a throne for Jesus. Her left hand supports Him while her right hand points Him out to be the Way. Christ usually holds a scroll (the Gospel) in His left hand while His right hand is extended in a gesture of blessing. Jim Forest recalls the words Mary spoke at the wedding in Cana, "Do whatever he tells you," and concludes, "These few words would serve well as another name for this icon." [\[xxxvii\]](#)

E. THE ORANT ICON OF THE THEOTOKOS SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

The earliest image of the Theotokos was found in the Roman Catacombs. It shows Mary in a classical posture of prayer, standing upright with upraised hands. It is called the Orant icon. *Orant* is a Latin word that means “one who prays.” In the fourth century iconographers added the image of the Unborn Infant on a rondel or mandorla to her bosom and produced the icon of the Mother of God of the Sign. One of the best examples of the Orant icon is to be found above the altar of the Holy

Wisdom in the cathedral in Kiev.

Thus, the classic icons of the Theotokos are:

1. The SweetKissing Icon (Glycophilousa)
2. The Eleousa or Vladimir Icon (Tenderness)
3. The Icon of the Sign
4. The Icon of the Way (Hodigitria)
5. The Orant Icon of the Theotokos

There are several others besides these. It is interesting to note that no saint is presented in so many different ways iconographically as the Theotokos.

In concluding this series on the icons of the Theotokos, we would be remiss not to mention why the Theotokos is so popular iconographically in the East. The explanation was offered by St. Irenaeus in the second century:

Just as Eve, wife of Adam, yet still a virgin...became by her disobedience the cause of death for herself and the whole human race, so Mary, too, espoused yet a virgin, became by her obedience the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race.... And so it was that the knot of Eve’s disobedience was loosed by Mary’s obedience.

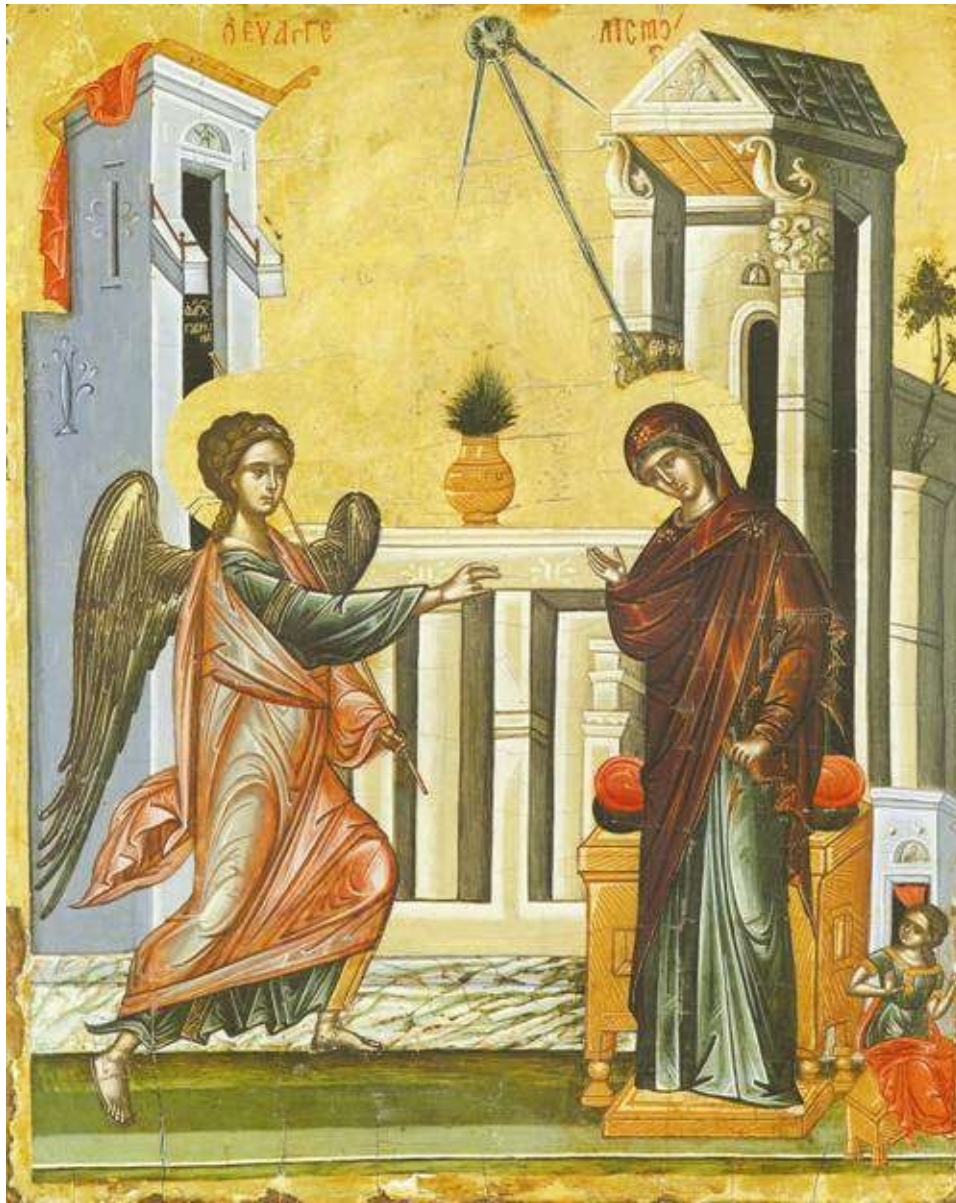
In the words of St. Gregory Nazianzen, “He (Christ) took the worst upon Himself to make us a gift of the best.” Through the Theotokos, who represents us, He did indeed give her and us the “best,” “throwing open the way of deification to the whole creation.” Death has no more dominion over her (or us). Raised from the dead, like her Son, and borne up to heaven, she became the first

human in whom was fulfilled the final end for which God created us.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ANNUNCIATION ICON SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

The Annunciation



The Annunciation is the great beginning of Christianity and of all the Feasts of the Lord. This is emphasized in the dismissal hymn of the feast where we chant, "Today is the crown of our salvation, and the manifestation of that mystery which is from everlasting...." The feast refers to the event in which the angel Gabriel visited the Theotokos at God's command to inform her that the time had come for the incarnation of the Word of God, and that she would be His mother (Luke 1:26-56). It is celebrated annually on March 25 (new calendar).

A DOUBLE FEAST

The Annunciation is in reality a double feast that honors both our Lord and His Mother. The Theotokos is honored not only for her virtues but chiefly for the fruit of her womb. This is clearly shown in the Salutations or Akathist Service in which the Theotokos is extolled, but always in connection with the fact that she bore the Word of God: “Rejoice for you are the throne of the King, for you bear Him Who bears all things.”

The Greek word for “annunciation” (*evangelismos*) means literally “good news.” It refers to the incarnation of the Word of God which is the greatest good news in history.

ANNUNCIATION OF GOOD NEWS

The good news of this great Feast is that “For our sake, He (the Incarnate Son of God) was made to be sin who did not know sin, so that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21). Full communion between God and humanity is now established, so that in Christ we may find adoption and immortality (deification).

The Divine Son, who from all eternity had existed in the bosom of the Father and had been an instrument in the creation of the universe, now empties Himself of His glory and “takes the form of a slave.” God and humanity are now united; we remain distinct, yes, but now forever inseparable. He came to bring forgiveness to sinners, redemption to prisoners, liberty to captives, and life to the dead.

Metropolitan Hierotheos calls the Annunciation “the correction of the fall of man in Paradise. There it was from a woman that the fall began, here it was from a woman that all the good things began. The Theotokos becomes the new Eve. There was Adam, here Christ. There Eve, here Mary. There the snake, here Gabriel. There the whispering of the serpent-snake to Eve, here the angel’s salutation to Mary (Joseph Vryenios). In this way, the sin of Adam and Eve was overcome.”[\[xxxviii\]](#)

MARY WAS “TROUBLED”

When the angel Gabriel announced to Mary that the time had come for the incarnation of the Word of God, Mary was “troubled” and somewhat distrustful, remembering how Satan had deceived the first Eve. This is expressed in the following two hymns from the Vespers and Matins service of the feast:

Mary said to the Angel: “Strange is thy speech and strange thine appearance, strange thy sayings and thy disclosures. I am a Maid who knows not wedlock, lead me not astray. Thou sayest that I shall conceive Him who remains uncircumscribed: and how shall my womb contain Him whom the wide spaces of the heavens cannot contain?” “O virgin, let the tent of Abraham that once contained God teach thee; for it prefigured thy womb, which now receives the Godhead.” (cf Genesis 18:1-16)

“I am filled with joy at thy words, yet am afraid: I fear lest thou deceive me, as Eve was deceived, and lead me far from God. Yet lo, thou criest out: O all ye works of the Lord, bless ye the Lord.”

“Mary said to Gabriel, ‘...How can this be, since I know not man?’ And the angel answered and said to her, ‘the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One Who is to be born will be called the Son of God’” (Luke 1:34-35).

“SO BE IT”

“Then Mary said, ‘Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be done to me according to your word’ (Luke 1:38). Or, as some paraphrase this verse, “So be it.”

Mary’s immediate response to the archangel Gabriel prompted Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow to write:

In the days of the creation of the world, when God was uttering his living and mighty “Let there be,” the word of the Creator brought creatures into the world. But on that day, unprecedented in the history of the world, when Mary uttered her brief and obedient, “so be it,” I hardly dare say what happened then—the word of the creature brought the Creator into the world.

GOD ASKS FIRST

God did not choose Mary without first asking her to be the Theotokos. He has the utmost respect for the gift of free will that He gave us. After Mary responds with the words, “so be it...Let it be done to me according to your word,” Gabriel calls her “Hail Mary, full of grace.” At that very moment, Mary was cleansed of the ancestral sin, and the Word of God was conceived in her womb. A Byzantine theologian of the 14th century, St. Nicolas Cabasilas, emphasizes the importance of Mary’s informed consent and free will:

The incarnation was not only the work of the Father, by His power and by his spirit, but it was also the work of the will and faith of the Virgin. Without the consent of the Immaculate, without the agreement of her faith, the plan was as unrealizable as it would have been without the intervention of the three divine Persons Themselves. It was only after having instructed her and persuaded her that God took her for His Mother and borrowed from her the flesh, that she so greatly wished to lend Him. Just as He became incarnate voluntarily, so He wished that His Mother should bear Him freely and with her full consent.

MARY MADE IMMACULATE AT THE ANNUNCIATION

It is for this reason that the East does not believe in the Immaculate Conception of Mary which was declared a dogma in the West. The Immaculate Conception teaches that Mary was chosen to bear the Word of God from all eternity. God does not bother to ask her if she wants to be the Theotokos. He arbitrarily predestines her while still in the womb. According to Orthodox teaching, Mary had to be all-pure in order to bear the all-pure Word of God. She had to be immaculate, but she was made immaculate not in the womb of her mother before she was born—the Orthodox Church believes—but at the Annunciation as soon as she agreed to God’s request. The moment she said, “So be it. Let it be done to me according to God’s Word”—it was at that very moment that she was made “immaculate”—“full of grace”—and the Word was conceived within her by the Holy Spirit.

It is for this reason that some call the Annunciation icon the icon of the Incarnation. From the moment of Mary’s assent, Jesus was conceived in her womb and began to be physically present on earth. The Incarnation began at the Annunciation. Nine months after the Annunciation (March 25), the Word was born (December 25). It is for this reason that Gabriel said to Mary following her acceptance, “Rejoice, Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women” (Luke 1:28-29). Origen noted that nowhere else in the Scriptures are such words addressed to a human being. Like us, Mary was born with the ancestral sin. She had all the consequences of decay and death on her body. The words of the Apostle Paul are clear: “...all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). It was at the moment of her assent that Mary was released from the ancestral sin. It was at this moment that the Holy Spirit conceived the word of God in her womb. It was at this moment that she was made immaculate.

Metropolitan Hierotheos testifies to this truth when he writes:

Therefore for the Panagia (Mary) no Pentecost, no Baptism was needed. What the apostles experienced on the day of Pentecost when they became members of the Body of Christ through the Holy Spirit, and what happens to all of us in the sacrament of Baptism, happened to the Panagia on the day of the Annunciation. It was then that she was released from the ancestral sin, not that she had any guilt, but she was deified in soul and body by reason of her union

with Christ. [\[xxxix\]](#)

THE MAGNIFICAT

Among Mary's greatest sayings is the Magnificat, which she uttered under the guidance of the Holy Spirit:

He who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name. His mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted them of low degree. He has filled the hungry with good things and the rich he has sent away empty (Luke 1:46-53).

Mary praises God for upsetting the values of the world, restoring them to their proper priority. The Magnificat itself is a reflection of Mary's soul. It is woven entirely from threads of Scripture drawn from the Word of God. She is completely at home with the Word of God, moving in and out of it with complete ease. She speaks and drinks of the Word of God so deeply that her words issue from the Word of God. So completely imbued is she with the Word of God that God chooses her to be the Mother of the Word Incarnate. The Magnificat shows that Mary's soul "swam in the Scriptures" (St. Chrysostom).

DESCRIPTION OF THE ICON

The range of icons of the Annunciation is enormous, for the Annunciation is represented frequently on the walls or pillars of Orthodox churches or on the iconostasis. All of this is a result of Mary's response to God at the Annunciation. The mystery of the Annunciation is so central to the faith that it is represented in a great variety of places. It is an icon, however, that is most appropriate when used on the Royal Doors. Why? It is here that each baptized person receives the body and blood of Christ. As at the Annunciation, Mary received God, body and soul, so we receive Him through the Eucharist just outside the Royal Door. Her yes to God made this possible for us.

SOME DETAILS OF THE ICON

In all versions of the icon, Mary is on the right and the archangel Gabriel is on the left. The top of the icon has a partially revealed sphere which is a symbol of heaven. It indicates the presence of God the Father. In most icons a ray of light radiates from the sphere to Mary. It represents the Holy Spirit who overshadowed Mary.

Gabriel appears on the left with wings to signify the speed with which angels fly to carry out God's commands. They do not walk or run; they fly.

In many icons of the Annunciation, Mary is pictured holding yarn with which she is sewing the veil for the Holy of Holies in the Temple. John Baggley comments on the significance of the yarn:

In some icons Mary is shown holding the yarn; in others it (the yarn) is shown falling to the ground as she lets go and attends to the appearance and message of the Archangel. Work on the veil for the Temple is allowed to fall aside as Mary attends to the higher vocation announced by Gabriel. The task of needlework that is being accomplished for the Jerusalem Temple is laid aside at the moment when Mary is called upon to fulfill her vocation to be the Temple of God.... From this moment she will be the Theotokos, the God-Bearer, the One through Whom the second Adam will be born. She is to prepare not only furnishings for the Jerusalem Temple, but the very flesh and humanity of Him whose presence heralds a New Creation. She becomes the Living City of Christ the King. [\[xl\]](#)

In many icons, two buildings in the background are linked by a red cloth, a symbol of the restoration or wholeness made possible by the Incarnation. The relationship between God and man is restored. The "dividing wall of hostility" between them has been removed.

One notes also that Gabriel seems to be bounding while Mary is seated. Since he is a spiritual being, Gabriel seems not to stand on the floor but to float above it.

In the icon, Mary turns her hand in the direction of the archangel asking for an answer to the doubts assailing her and at the same time bowing her head as she expresses her submission. In many icons, she presses her palm to her breast—the gesture of acceptance or submission to God’s will. “Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it done to me according to Thy word.”

AN ICON OF GREAT JOY

Vladimir Lossky describes the icon of the Annunciation as one that expresses great joy:

Like the Gospel story (Luke 1:26-38) and the religious service of the feast, the icon of the annunciation is permeated with deep inner joy. It is the joy of the Old Testament promise being fulfilled through the incarnation of the Redeemer of the world. “To-day is the beginning of our salvation and the manifestation of the Eternal Mystery. The Son of God becometh the Son of the Virgin, and Gabriel announceth the good tidings of grace.

Wherefore let us also with him cry to the Mother of God: Hail Thou that art full of grace; the Lord is with Thee.” This joy is in the colours, in the festive renderings of details, and in the posture of the Archangel. The majority of icons depict him in swift motion: he has just descended from heaven and “his look is the look of a diligent servant intent on carrying out the task given by his Master.” His legs are wide apart as though he were running. In his left hand he holds a staff, the symbol of a messenger, his right hand, with a strong movement, is stretched towards the Virgin Mary; he communicates to her the glad tidings from his Master, the Mystery of the Divine Providence. [\[xli\]](#)

The triune action of God is expressed through this icon. The archangel Gabriel announces the will of the Father. The Son is conceived in the womb of the Theotokos. The Holy Spirit, through His power, accomplishes the divine Incarnation.

A PERSONAL AND EXISTENTIAL FEAST

The great feast of the Annunciation will lose its true meaning if it does not become personal and existential to each one of us. It must become our personal feast and our personal annunciation. The Church fathers say that the Word of God is a seed; the heart of man is a womb. As this seed is sown in our hearts (wombs), we must labor to allow the Holy Spirit to impregnate us with the fruits of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul states, "My little children, for whom I labor in birth again until Christ is formed in you" (Gal. 4:19). The labors are our ascetic struggles to be purified of the passions and to allow Christ to be formed in us (deification). What happened physically to the Theotokos must happen spiritually to every baptized Christian as Christ is formed in us as He was in the Theotokos. This is the reason the Icon of the Sign, the Theotokos with the mandorla of Christ in her womb, appears on the front wall of many Orthodox churches, reminding us that our purpose in life is to "put on Christ."

When she went to visit her cousin Elizabeth who was then six months pregnant with John the Baptist, Elizabeth greeted Mary with these words: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:42-43). And Mary herself, by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, predicted the honor that would be paid her throughout history: "For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (Luke 1:48).

In Matins, Vespers, and all the services of the hours of prayer, the Orthodox Church sings this hymn which expresses Mary's unique position in our faith:

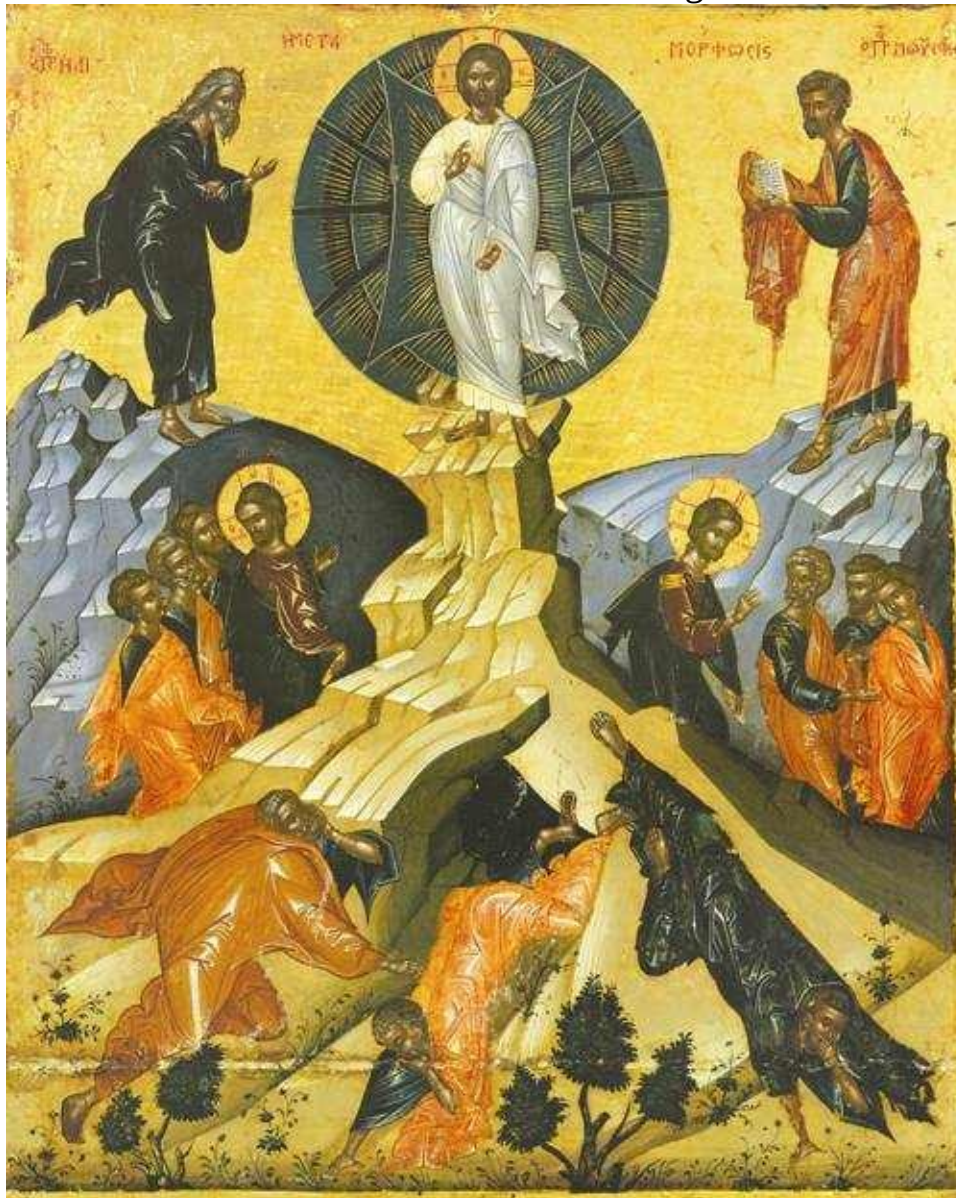
It is truly right to bless you, O Theotokos, ever-blessed and most pure, and the mother of our God. More honorable than the Cherubim, and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, without defilement you gave birth to God the word: True Theotokos, we magnify you.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE ICON OF THE TRANSFIGURATION SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

No saint of the Eastern Church has ever borne the stigmata, those outward marks which have made certain great Western saints and mystics as it were living patterns of the suffering Christ. But, by contrast, Eastern saints have very frequently been transfigured by the inward light of uncreated grace, and have appeared resplendent, like Christ on the mount of Transfiguration. [\[xlii\]](#) —Vladimir Lossky

The Transfiguration



“And He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun and his clothes became as white as light” (Matt. 17:2).

The feast of the Transfiguration is of central importance in the life of Jesus. Three of the four gospels record accounts of how it happened (Mark 9:2-9, Matthew 17:1-9, Luke 9:28-36). They report how Christ took three of His disciples, Peter, James, and John, and led them up a mountain, where He “was transfigured before them, and His face shone like the sun, and His garments became white as light” (Mt. 17:2). As the Kontakion of the Feast tells us, Christ enabled three of his disciples to see Him in His divine glory “as far as they could see it; so that when they would behold [Him] crucified, they would understand that [His] suffering was voluntary, and would proclaim to the world that [He is] truly the Radiance of the Father.” The Kontakion establishes a direct connection between the Cross and the Transfiguration. The West follows the more ancient practice of celebrating this feast during Lent. The East celebrates the Transfiguration on August 6th. The Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos offers one reason the East chose the date of August 6:

So, canonically Christ’s Transfiguration should be celebrated in the month of March, corresponding to the time of the year when Easter is celebrated. But since this time coincides with the period of Lent and could not be celebrated festively, the feast was transferred to the sixth of August. This date is not chosen at random, as it is forty days before the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross (14 September), which is similar to Good Friday. ^[xliii]

Fr. Andrew Louth feels that it is to be lamented that both in the West and East this great feast does not receive the attention it deserves. “In the West, it has declined to a minor feast. In the East, its liturgical significance...has been dwarfed by its proximity to the Feast of the Dormition of the Mother of God” (Aug. 15). ^[xliv]

A LOOK AT THE ICON

As do most Orthodox icons, the icon of this feast shows both the historical and the eternal aspects of the event. In the icon we see the mountain, Christ in shining white garments, and Moses and Elijah. We see Jesus “who appeared in glory and spoke [to them] of His departure [His death] which He was to accomplish at Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31). Finally we see the three disciples who “fell on their faces, and were filled with awe” (Mt. 17:6). These are the details of the historical event; but they are arranged on the icon in such a way as to emphasize the inner meaning of the event. The six figures, rather than appearing small on top of the mountain, completely overshadow the mountain, and the mountain itself is usually shown as one mountain with three peaks, underlining the Transfiguration as a revelation of the Triune God: the Son who was transfigured; the Father who by His voice bore witness to His Son; and the Spirit who shone together with the Son in the bright cloud. Thus both this icon and that of the baptism of Jesus involve the manifestation of the Trinity (Theophany).

THE OLDEST ICON OF THE TRANSFIGURATION

Norman Russell describes the oldest surviving representation of the Transfiguration:

The oldest surviving representation of the Transfiguration is in the apse of the sixth-century monastery of St. Catherine at the foot of Mount Sinai. Here we see a bearded Christ in white and gold garments standing, with his right hand raised in benediction, within a blue mandorla (an almond-shaped background) against a gold background. Eight rays emanate from him, the two lateral ones touching the standing figures of Elijah and Moses on either side of him, the three lower ones reaching down to John, Peter and James, who are depicted kneeling or lying down.

The mosaic was made in about 560, in the age of the Emperor Justinian. At the time a controversy was raging about how the divine and human natures should be thought of as relating to each other. Here in the mosaic we have an astonishing representation of a human figure shot through with divinity. The interpretation of the human and the divine without separation or confusion is rendered visually in a way scarcely attainable in a written text.

What is also remarkable is how the human figures participate in the divine glory. There is a smooth transition from the radiant, almost dematerialized figure of Christ to the serene figures of Elijah and Moses alongside him, and then to the agitated figures of the apostles at his feet. The status of each may be different, but all are grouped around Christ on a gold background. As Andreopoulos remarks, the “transfigured” part is not divided from the “struggling” part as in later icons: “theosis seems more achievable here than in later depictions.”^[xlv]

THE UPPER AND LOWER LEVELS OF THE ICON

When we look at the icon of the Transfiguration, we see that it is clearly divided into two roughly equal portions: the top half, which shows the divine revelation, and the bottom half, which shows the human response. In the center of the top section is the transfigured Christ. Our eyes are drawn to Him because of His central position and His glistening white garments. He is surrounded by a *mandorla*, a circular, oval, or pointed-oval shape which is seen on many other icons, including those of the Resurrection and the Ascension. In the *mandorla*, Christ is enthroned in glory. The *mandorla* indicates the divine glory, and it is usually blue, the color which is often used in iconography to indicate the divine.

On the right and left of Christ are Elijah and Moses. Both appeared to show that Christ is the fulfillment of the law and the prophets. The Law is represented by Moses, who holds a book of the tablets of the law which he received on Mount Sinai. The Prophets are represented by the prophet Elijah, who did not die but was taken up to heaven in a fiery chariot. The dead are represented by Moses, the living by Elijah. Both Moses and Elijah had experienced a vision of God, i.e., Moses on Mt. Sinai and Elijah on Mt. Carmel: Moses in a thick cloud on Mt. Sinai; Elijah or Elias on Mount Carmel where God spoke to him in a whisper, a “still, small voice.”

THE BOTTOM HALF: THE HUMAN RESPONSE

In the bottom section of the icon the postures of the three disciples show the human response to this overwhelming revelation. James and John appear in postures of astonishment: prostrate, kneeling, falling on their faces or sometimes falling backward; often they are shown covering their faces or shielding their eyes, and in many icons they are even shown as losing their sandals, recalling Mt. Sinai where Moses was asked to remove his sandals because he was on holy ground.

Peter, on the other hand, is usually depicted turned toward the Lord to show the desire which led him to say, "It is good to be here." In some icons he, too, shields his eyes, but in others he gestures toward the Lord, as if to direct our attention to Him. The lower part of the icon is much darker than the upper part whose brightness expresses a light far brighter than the sun. The disarray of the apostles' garments indicates the dramatic impact the vision had on them.

The presence of Moses and Elijah bears witness to the fact that Jesus is the Expected Messiah, who is the fulfillment of the Law (Moses) and the prophets (Elijah).

The three rays of light emanating from Christ's body point to the disciples below. There is a marked contrast between the calm of the upper half and the excited dynamism of the lower half. The disciples are bowled over by the sight of the Uncreated Light. Peter can be recognized by his short beard and thick, curly hair, and John by his red robe. Often Peter is kneeling, John thrown backward, and James shielding himself. The icon shows both the Old Testament (Moses and Elijah) and the New Testament disciples (Peter, James, and John) acknowledging Jesus as the Expected Messiah.

Moses was allowed to see only God's back in the Old Testament; now he sees God "face to face." Elijah was only allowed to hear God's "still small voice"; now he hears God's full voice and sees Him "face to face." This occurs in a religion that more than any other stressed the transcendental nature of God. If we were present, we may have suffered a heart attack but for the grace of God.

A CHAPEL NEAR THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT ATHOS

Norman Russell explains what happens every year on Mt. Athos at a chapel dedicated to the Transfiguration:

Near the summit of Mount Athos at around 6,000 feet there is a chapel dedicated to the Transfiguration. Each year, before the feast day on August 6th, a party of monks climbs the mountain laden with tools and materials to repair the damage caused by the storms and lightning strikes of the previous winter. The monks then spend the night in the chapel, keeping the vigil of the feast. The next day they return to their monasteries elated, the words of the night office still ringing in their ears:

“Thou wast transfigured upon Mount Tabor, O Jesus, and a shining cloud, spread out like a tent, covered the apostles with Thy glory. Whereupon their gaze fell to the ground, for they could not bear to look upon the brightness of the unapproachable glory of thy face, O Saviour Christ, our God who art without beginning. Do Thou, who then hast shone upon them with Thy light, give light now to our souls.”[\[xlv\]](#)

AN APPEARANCE OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD ON EARTH

The Transfiguration is a theophany, a manifestation of God as Trinity. It is also a revelation of the kingdom of God, because where the king is, there is the kingdom. If asked, “Did the kingdom of God ever appear on earth?” we must hasten to respond that it did appear on earth at the Transfiguration. In the teaching of the holy fathers, the kingdom of God is participation in the Uncreated Light. The experience of the Uncreated Light is a taste of eternal life.

Even though the Gospel of John does not mention the actual event of the Transfiguration, it is so completely filled with the theme of glory and its manifestation in Christ as to be considered the gospel of the Transfiguration. There are those who consider John 1:14 an allusion to the Transfiguration:

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.”

“We beheld His glory!” “Full of grace and truth!” Is not this exactly what happened on Mt. Tabor? Truly, “There is no other place in the entire Bible... where the divinity of Christ is witnessed in such a dramatic way.” [\[xlvi\]](#)

The Transfiguration was the fulfillment of a promise Jesus had made to His disciples. “Assuredly, I say to you that there are some standing here who will not taste death till they see the Kingdom of God present with power” (Matthew 16:28).

His words were fulfilled when Peter, James, and John beheld His glory: “And as He was Transfigured before them, His *face* shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light.” The three disciples thus “saw” the kingdom of God “present with power.” They beheld His glory on His face, which “shone like the sun.”

Professor Mantzaridis adds something very important at this point. He writes:

For Palamas the vision of God “face to face” does not mean the vision of His

essence but of His divine radiance which...is rendered participable and visible to mankind in the Holy Spirit.... The Light of Mount Tabor is also seen by the hesychasts in their mystical experiences, and in the age to come all the saints will behold it. [\[xlvi\]](#)

Thus, the essence of God remains totally transcendent, “wholly other.” The Uncreated Light that shone through Jesus at the Transfiguration is part of the energies of God which bestow upon us “grace upon grace” from the Triune God’s infinitely transcendent and unparticipable essence. Thus, in the words of St. Maximus, “The Divine Monad is hidden even in His Epiphany.”

WHO CHANGED?

At the Transfiguration, it was not that Christ Himself was somehow changed into something He was not, or that He was given something He did not previously have, or that something was added which He did not already possess.

It was not Christ who changed; it was the eyes of the disciples that were truly opened. The eyes of the disciples were changed from blindness to beholding His uncreated glory shining from His face brighter than the sun: “When Christ was transfigured He neither received anything different, nor was changed into anything different, but was revealed to His disciples as He was, opening their eyes and giving sight to the blind” (St. Gregory Palamas).

The three disciples “saw” the kingdom of God. They experienced the glory of His divinity shining in the human face of Jesus. The disciples themselves were also “transfigured” to a certain degree; they too were glorified and transformed.

THE UNCREATED LIGHT

Note that Jesus is transfigured within a bright cloud, shining in white with three rays of light pointing down to the disciples, showing the trinitarian source of the light. Commenting on this light in which Jesus was enveloped at the Transfiguration, Fr. John Romanides wrote:

When the Uncreated Light becomes visible, it is much more luminous and intense than the light of the sun, and yet it is by nature different from sunlight. It is the very Light of the Transfiguration. In fact, this Light is not even light as we understand it and are familiar with it. Why not? Because the Uncreated Light transcends light. [\[xlix\]](#)

This “Uncreated Light” writes St. Gregory Palamas constitutes part of the energies of God that communicate the presence of God to the disciples. While the essence of God remained hidden, Gregory insisted that “God is called Light not according to His Essence, but according to His energy.” This energy of the Uncreated Light that enveloped Christ at the Transfiguration pointed the disciples to the “Light that transcends light.” For God dwells in “unapproachable light,” according to God’s Word (1 Tim. 6:16). In fact, the image of light pervades the icon of the Transfiguration.

As Paul Evdokimov observes, “There is a whole science of light...for in the world of the icon the sun never sets; it is day without dusk, the brilliant noonday of the Incarnation, without shadow or darkness.... The source of light is absent, for the light is within the icon, which itself illuminates the details of its composition.” [\[1\]](#) He calls this “the Taboric light.”

The fact that the saints are already experiencing the kingdom of God is depicted in iconography through the halo, a crown of light over their heads. Both St. Seraphim and Motovilov experienced this Uncreated Light in their famous encounter with the Holy Spirit.

LIGHT TO SOME; FIRE TO OTHERS

The Transfiguration shows that humans can, if they so choose, participate in direct communication with God through His energies and come to achieve what is called deification or theosis.

Gregory Palamas countered Barlaam's argument that God cannot be experienced with the claim that the light on Mt. Tabor was uncreated and that the apostles' ability to see it testified to the human potential for direct communication with God. Paul Evdokimov said once that the iconographer painting the Transfiguration was painting not so much with colors as with the Taboric light itself—a light that is uncreated and cannot possibly be expressed or captured on any icon.

There are some who see a connection between the Transfiguration and the Second Coming of Jesus:

The Transfiguration, as Theophane's greatest work, was written as an anticipation of Christ's glorious second coming. Not only does it open a perspective into eternity within the world of time and space but it also offers visual evidence of the possibility of humankind's deification here on earth. It is a brief glimpse of the mystical eighth day of creation, when all created matter will share in the eternal glory of the Lord. [\[li\]](#)

Commenting on the Uncreated Light, some Church fathers say that it becomes light to those who have purified themselves through repentance, and it becomes fire for those who remain in sin.

It is highly significant that the Transfiguration occurred while Jesus was praying: "While He was praying His face changed in appearance and His clothing became dazzling white" (Luke 9:29).

Origen, an early Christian teacher, was the one who identified the "high mountain" with Mt. Tabor.

TRANSFIGURED PERSONS

The Transfiguration is not simply the commemoration of an event in the life of Christ that happened in the past. It concerns each one of us. What happened to the humanity of Christ can and will happen also to the humanity of Christ's true followers. As one of the hymns of Vespers says, *Today Christ has changed the darkened nature of Adam, and filling it with brightness, He has made it godlike.*

If Jesus, the Head of the Body, was transfigured, then we who are members of His body will also be transfigured with Him. The dazzling light that shown through Christ on Mount Tabor is not just something that happened in the past. It is a window through which we can look to see the reality of the kingdom of God not only in Christ but also in us.

As we are being incorporated into Christ in this life through faith, prayer, the sacraments, and daily repentance, we are gradually being transformed into His likeness. This is our personal transfiguration in Christ. We are not just earthen vessels of clay, subject to the universal law

of death and corruption. These earthen vessels bear a "great treasure," as

St. Paul states. This "great treasure" was revealed to us at the Transfiguration of Jesus. "When Christ who is our life appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4).

Pseudo-Macarius describes the light of the Transfiguration as follows:

Just as the body of the Lord was glorified on the mountain when it was transfigured in the glory of God and in infinite light, so the bodies of the saints will be glorified and shine like lightning.... "The glory which thou hast given me I have given to them" (John 17:22). As countless candles are lighted from a single flame, so the bodies of all Christ's members will be what Christ is.... Our human nature is transformed into the fullness of God; it becomes wholly fire and light.

Jesus promises us a vision of God. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). St. Paul looks forward to the fullness of revelation: "Now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face" (1 Cor. 13:12).

We can become not only spirit-bearing, but also God-bearing, pervaded by God's presence. We are called to share in the eternal glory of God (theosis). It was our own human nature which was filled with divine glory at the Transfiguration in the human body of Jesus. At the Transfiguration our own human nature was made Godlike and partook of God's glory. One of the most awesome truths of our Orthodox Christian faith is that the second person of the Holy Trinity is one of us! He shares our humanity.

St. Gregory Palamas mentions the case of Moses, whose body shown so brightly that the Israelites could not bear to look at him. They had to use a veil, as happened also in the case of St. Stephen the Martyr, whose face took on the appearance of the face of an angel.

St. Cyril of Jerusalem explains that God placed light even in small insects that fly in summer (fireflies), so as to make it easier for us to believe that which would ultimately happen to us!

THE DARKENED IMAGE OF GOD GLOWS

The divine uncreated light did not merely shine around Christ; His very flesh was aflame with it. The image of God in us, which had been darkened by the sin of Adam, was once again glowing in the human nature of Jesus. Transfigured and sanctified by the grace of God, this human body of ours can indeed become an icon of man/woman deified, transfigured, glowing with the uncreated light of the Holy Trinity. It is for this reason that many Orthodox theologians consider the Feast of the Transfiguration as the day of the celebration of our deification or theosis, the divinization of human nature in Christ.

Also called Christification, theosis has already occurred in the human nature of Jesus as evidenced at the Transfiguration. It occurred originally, of course, at the Incarnation when Jesus was conceived in the Theotokos by the Holy Spirit. That is when theosis first took place: the divine nature of the Word weds humanity in the womb in the Christ Child.

St. Andrew of Crete (660-740), the early Byzantine hymn writer, was the first to connect the Transfiguration of Jesus specifically with theosis.

THE BRIGHTNESS OF THE CLOTHES

The Gospel testifies that the clothing on the body of Christ shone, “His clothing became shining, exceedingly white, like snow, such as no launderer on earth could whiten them.” St. Gregory Palamas interpreted this to mean that God wanted to show us what the vestments of glory would be like with which the saints would be clothed in the age to come. In the words of Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos:

The patristic teaching is well known that the uncreated Grace which comes to the soul of man is transmitted to the body as well, and then it is conveyed also to irrational creation. Thus the whole of creation receives the beneficial results of the deification of man. Therefore, just as the fall of man also had cosmological extensions, in the same way also the regeneration and deification of man has universal and cosmological dimensions. [\[lii\]](#)

A GLIMPSE OF GLORY

Through the Transfiguration, man is allowed to glimpse the glory of God in anticipation of the Last Day when “every eye shall see Him.” The believers will not only see Him but also share in His transfigured glory. Just as through baptism we share in the death and resurrection of Christ, even so we shall, if we persevere in our walk with Jesus, share one day in His transfiguration. “We shall be changed,” writes St. Paul, “in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”

Our transfiguration is a process which begins in this life when we are baptized, born again by water and Spirit, and will be completed, consummated in eternity. Our transfiguration at the end of time, St. Paul affirms, will be instantaneous and complete.

Bishop Ware describes this process:

The glory which shone from Jesus on Mount Tabor is a glory in which all mankind is called to share. On Mount Tabor we see Christ’s human nature—the human substance which He took from us—filled with splendor, ‘made godlike’ or ‘deified.’ What has happened to human nature in Christ can happen also in the humanity of Christ’s followers. The Transfiguration, then, reveals to us the full potentiality of our human nature: it shows us the glory which our manhood once possessed and the glory which, by God’s grace, it will again recover at the Last Day.

This is a cardinal aspect of the present feast, to which the liturgical texts frequently revert. At His Transfiguration, it is said, the Lord “in His own person showed them the nature of man, arrayed in the original beauty of the image” (Great Vespers, aposticha). [\[liii\]](#)

THE MYSTERY OF THE EIGHTH DAY EXPERIENCED NOW

The mystery of the eighth day was experienced by the disciples at the Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor. It was experienced also by St. Seraphim in his conversation with Nicholas Motovilov when both were bathed in the uncreated light of the Holy Spirit. Through the energies of God, the sacraments, and prayer, we too can experience the presence and parousia of the Transfigured Christ. The liturgical music we hear and sing, the incense burned and smelled, the sanctified water of Theophany, the bread and wine of the Holy Eucharist, the sacred oil of Unction, the icons we see and contemplate, the sanctified oil of Chrism, all the cosmic material of the sacraments enable us to see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and truly experience the presence of God. As God took on a human body and became flesh in Christ, so matter becomes the vehicle for divine energies, orienting our sight to the light of Mt. Tabor, seen in the Transfigured Christ. As St. Gregory Palamas said, “Light is not just the object of vision but the very means by which we can see.” This is how Orthodox Christians see, touch, and experience the presence (parousia) of God in the worship services.

Paul Evdokimov writes, “According to the Fathers of the Church, since the Sabbath is the seventh day, Sunday does not replace it, but constitutes the eighth day or, in the absolute and unique sense, the first...it is the weekly Easter, and represents eternity...it is an eschatological attitude, the expression of epectasis, looking for parousia.”^[liv]

A FESTIVE FEAST FOR THE ORTHODOX WORLD

Most Protestant Christians do not place the same importance on the Transfiguration as Orthodox Christians do. Why? They look upon the Transfiguration as something that happened in the past and is not particularly germane to us in today's world. Not so in the Orthodox tradition. From the very beginning, Saint Helena, the mother of the Emperor Constantine, was first to have a church built on Mt. Tabor in AD 320 to honor the Transfiguration. Countless shrines and icons of this great event fill the Orthodox world, which celebrates the feast festively on August 6th. For the Orthodox, Christ's Transfiguration has deeper mystical significance, applicable to the here and now, and is available to all who are being transfigured into His image. After all, it was not only Jesus who was transfigured on Mt. Tabor; the disciples were transfigured with Him! As Fr. Christoforos Stavropoulos writes, "The Apostle Peter describes with total clarity the purpose of life: We are to become partakers of divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). This is the purpose of life: that we be participants, sharers in the nature of God and in the life of Christ, communicants of divine grace and energy. [\[lv\]](#)

TRANSFIGURATION: A THEOPHANY

It must be realized that the Feast of the Transfiguration is greatly venerated in the East. It is considered to be a Theophany, i.e., a manifestation of the Trinity. In the words of Vladimir Lossky:

That is why the Epiphany (the feast of the Baptism of Christ, according to the liturgical tradition of the East) and the Transfiguration are celebrated so solemnly: It is the revelation of the Trinity that is being celebrated—for the voice of the Father was heard and the Holy Spirit was present the first time in the form of a dove, and the second time as the luminous cloud which covered the Apostles. This royal aspect of Christ—‘the One of the Holy Trinity’—who came into the world to conquer death is characteristic of Orthodox spirituality in every epoch and in every country. [\[lvi\]](#)

A PLEDGE AND PROMISE OF GLORY

The Transfiguration looks forward to the Second Coming of Christ, when the Lord Jesus will appear once more in the same glory with which He appeared on Mount Tabor. With Him also at that time will appear the bodies of the saints, raised from their graves. They, too, will shine with the divine light that shone from our Lord on the mountain. Thus the glory of Transfiguration becomes a pledge and a promise of the glory of Paradise. It is a preview of the Second Coming of Jesus. It is indeed an appetizer for heaven.

THE WITNESS OF ICONS

The icons of the Church bear witness to the Transfiguration. In the Orthodox Church, icons portray not the fallen but the transfigured state of man, the new creation, the deification of man as he/she becomes a partaker of God's nature. Icons express the spiritual world where the saints are permeated by the same light that shone from Jesus at the Transfiguration. Thus, the icons of the saints—and especially the Icon of the Transfiguration—bear witness to the fact that by God's grace we, too, can be—and are being—transfigured from glory to glory.

WE ARE BEING TRANSFIGURED

A profoundly important verse in 2 Corinthians 4:6 speaks of the process of transfiguration that is taking place within us: “God who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the of glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

Elsewhere St. Paul writes that “We with our unveiled faces reflecting like mirrors the light of the Lord, all grow brighter and brighter as we are turned into the image we reflect; this is the work of the Lord, who is Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). This transfiguration is taking place now through prayer and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Thus, the transfiguration of Christ on Mount Tabor is extended to the life of the members of His body, to us, foreshadowing the future resurrection of the dead when we shall partake of His glory.

For this reason the Feast of the Transfiguration fills us with joyful hope as it is celebrated festively in the Orthodox Church on August 6th. For the glory of Jesus manifested on Mount Tabor is ours to share. The daily mysterious process of grace, working within us, will reach a glorious fulfillment on the last day:

See what love the Father has bestowed on us that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are.... We are God’s children now; what we shall be has not yet been revealed. We do know that when it is revealed we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 Jn. 3:1-2).

“GO FORTH IN PEACE”

At the end of every divine liturgy the priest invites us to “go forth in peace.” This is not a mere dismissal from public worship but precisely our evangelical commission as Christians “who have received the true light” to come down from the Mt. Tabor of the Eucharist, to go out into the world, and to transform it. Thus, we who have received the heavenly Spirit can now return to the pain of the world and carry the cross of Christ with the certainty of victory. We climb the Mount of Transfiguration (Mt. Tabor) with Jesus every time we participate in the liturgy. For it is through the liturgy that we enter the kingdom of God. It is for this reason that the liturgy begins with the invocation, “Blessed be the Kingdom....” Its purpose is to usher us into the kingdom of God. Through prayer, the word of God, and the Eucharist we are transfigured with Christ in the liturgy in anticipation of our ultimate transfiguration with Him at the Second Coming.

This present world, this present life, with all of its pain, suffering, and grief can be transformed by the glory of the transfigured Christ, shining in our hearts and minds. St. Paul reminds us that as faithful Christians we can live “as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live;...as sorrowful yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything” (2 Cor. 6:9-10). This paradoxical view of the Christian life that is so full of sober optimism and joy derives ultimately from the cross of Christ, which transforms and transfigures loss into victory; dishonor into glory; and death into eternal life. Thus the life of the Christian can be changed, transformed, and transfigured little by little, step by step, prayer by prayer, from glory to glory. And through the transfigured Christian, the whole world can be transfigured until everyone and everything is embraced by the infinite and unconditional love of God.

A VISION OF THE SHORE

Some years ago, Florence Chadwick failed to complete her swim across the English Channel by several hundred yards. She explained later that the reason for her failure was the morning fog, which hung heavily over the Channel. “If I could have seen the shore,” she said, “I would have made it.” Every year on the Feast of the Transfiguration God allows us “to see the shore.” In His love, God provides us with “a vision of the shore” in the mystery of the Transfiguration when the glory and beauty of God momentarily flashed through the person of Jesus, as will one day happen to our resurrected bodies. This is our glorious destiny. This is what makes the Transfiguration such a joyful feast. This is why life has such exalted meaning. This is why, in hope, we bring children into this world: to enable them to share in this eternal glory. As St. Paul writes,

I consider that what we suffer at this present time cannot be compared at all with the glory that is going to be revealed to us (Romans 8:18).

For one day, says St. Paul,

This perishable will put on the imperishable and this mortal will put on immortality.... Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Cor. 15:54, 58).

When Christ comes again, writes St. Paul, He will “transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to his glorious body” (Phil. 3:21).

For having gone up, O Christ, with your disciples to Mt. Tabor, You were transfigured and have made the nature that had grown dark in Adam to shine again as lightning. —**Vespers of Transfiguration**

The *apolytikion* that is chanted on the day of the festival of the Transfiguration sums up the significance of this event with these verses:

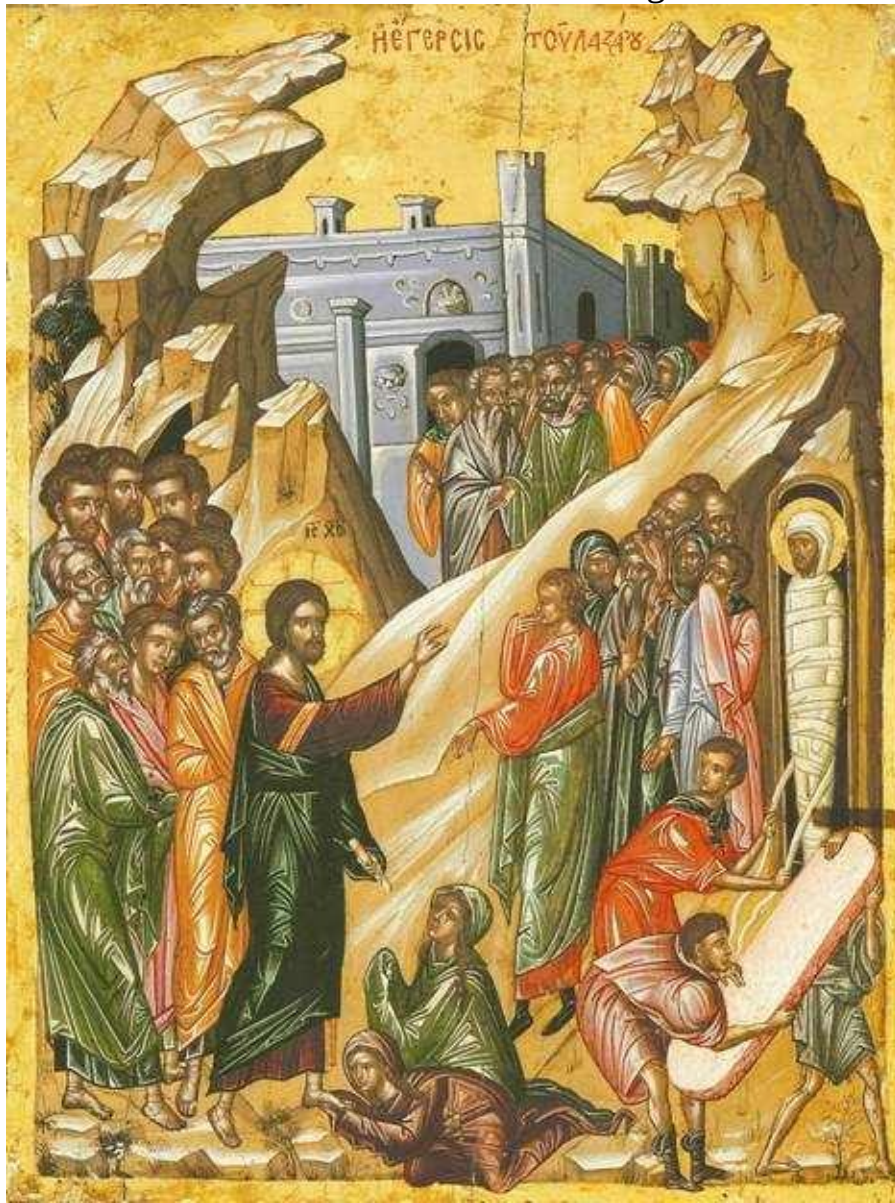
Thou wast transfigured on the mountain, O Christ our God, and didst show Thy glory to Thy disciples, to the extent that they were able to behold it. Shine upon us sinners, too, Thine eternal light, by the intercessions of the Theotokos:

Light-giver, glory to Thee.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE ICON OF THE RAISING OF LAZARUS SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

The Raising of Lazarus



The icon of the Raising of Lazarus is so closely connected with the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday that we sing the same apolytikion (dismissal hymn) for both feasts:

Giving us before Thy Passion an assurance of the general resurrection, Thou hast raised Lazarus from the dead, O Christ our God. Therefore, like the children, we also carry tokens of victory, and cry to Thee, the Conqueror of death: Hosanna in the highest; blessed is He that comes in the Name of the Lord.

Since these two feasts, though closely interconnected, are counted as two separate feasts of the Lord in what we term as the twelve great feasts of the Lord, we shall examine them separately in this study.

A FORESHADOWING OF THE RESURRECTION OF JESUS

The Resurrection of Lazarus is a foreshadowing of the Resurrection of Jesus which occurs shortly thereafter. It is also a foreshadowing of the general resurrection of mankind which will take place at the Second Coming of Jesus. As mentioned, the two events are closely connected. Why? Because the triumphal reception of Jesus on Palm Sunday took place precisely because of the awesome miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus, even though many Jews at that time were anticipating, mistakenly, a worldly Messiah who would free them from the Roman yoke.

THE LAST OF THE GREAT MIRACLES

The raising of Lazarus, as described in John 11:1-44, is the last of the great miracles or signs (*semeia*) worked by Jesus and selected by the Apostle John as a manifestation of the divinity of Jesus. The raising of Lazarus took place in Bethany, a town just a few miles from Jerusalem. After this event, the greatest of all signs (*semeia or miracles*) will be the Resurrection of Jesus Himself. The resistance to Jesus by those who did not believe in Him was more determined than ever after the raising of Lazarus (John 11:45-57).

While some were planning to remove Jesus, Caiaphas the high priest said to the Council, “You do not understand that it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish” (John 11:50). John interprets Caiaphas’ words as a prophecy that Jesus would die for the sins of the world. Thus, the raising of Lazarus takes us right into the arena of Holy Week where the Life-Giver who raised Lazarus from the dead will bring salvation to the world through His own entry into death and the tomb.

WE ARE TRANSITIONED INTO HOLY WEEK

The Saturday of the raising of Lazarus is the first day after the end of Lent. Together with the entry of Jesus into Jerusalem the next day, it marks the transition from Lent into Holy Week. At Vespers on Friday evening, the hymns express a keen sense of anticipation of the events that will take us from Lent into Holy Week:

Having completed the forty days that bring profit to our soul, let us cry: Rejoice, city of Bethany, home of Lazarus. Rejoice, Martha and Mary, his sisters. Tomorrow Christ will come, by His word to bring your dead brother to life. Hearing his voice, bitter hell that is never satisfied will tremble and groan aloud, and it will release Lazarus bound in his grave-clothes. Amazed by this miracle, a multitude of Jews will come to meet Him with palms and branches, though their fathers look on Him with malicious envy, yet shall the children praise Him, saying: Blessed is He that comes in the Name of the Lord, the King of Israel.

Other hymns proclaim that the raising of Lazarus has universal implications:

Before Thine own death, O Christ, Thou hast raised from hell Lazarus that was four days dead, and hast shaken the dominion of death. Through this one man whom Thou hast loved, Thou hast foretold the deliverance of all from corruption. We therefore worship Thine almighty power and cry: Blessed art Thou, O Saviour, have mercy upon us.

PALMS: SYMBOLS OF VICTORY OVER DEATH

In both these feasts, Christ is glorified as the conqueror of death. The very palms we hold on Palm Sunday are symbols of victory for the raising of Lazarus, which is a foreshadowing both of Christ's resurrection and the general resurrection of the dead at the Second Coming. The *apolytikion* tells us that by raising Lazarus, Christ gave us the assurance that He will raise all, not just the righteous. Living and dead will all appear before His judgment seat. As the dismissal hymn states, "Giving us before Thy Passion an assurance of the general resurrection, Thou hast raised Lazarus from the dead, O Christ our God."

ONE FUNDAMENTAL DIFFERENCE

The commanding presence of Christ before the tomb of dead Lazarus, His imperative voice which summoned him back to life, the physical presence of Lazarus at his home with his family serve to pre-announce what will happen at the Second Coming. There is one fundamental difference, however. Lazarus died again and was buried. After the Second Coming, we shall be given spiritual bodies which will not need nourishment, sleep, food, or drink, and which will be immortal, incorruptible, and not subject to death.

“LORD, HE WHOM YOU LOVE IS ILL”

The biblical account tells us that Jesus loved Lazarus and his sisters very much. This is meant to show how much He loves each one of us. Who is Lazarus? You are. Who is Mary? You are. Who is Martha? You are. When Jesus is told of Lazarus' sickness, the words used are, “Lord, behold, he whom you love is ill” (John 11:3). When we pray for sick people today, should we not use the same words, “Lord, [name] whom you love is ill. Come, heal him/her.”

“THIS ILLNESS...IS FOR THE GLORY OF GOD” (John 11:4)

While everyone around Him was panicking, Jesus simply said, “This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it.” He then demonstrated His power by raising Lazarus from the dead and by raising up a strong faith in those who were there.

How well this illustrates how God can use even a tragedy to advance His agenda. When life is yielded to Him, it can become a canvas for Him to paint on. Sickness—and even death—can redound to His greater glory.

“OUR FRIEND LAZARUS SLEEPS” (John 11:11)

When Jesus realizes that Lazarus is now dead, He says to His disciples, “Our friend Lazarus sleeps, but I go that I may wake him up.” He calls death “sleep” because in God’s eyes, death is only a temporary sleep until the soul returns to animate the body at Christ’s command. The place where the body sleeps is called in Greek a *koimitirion*, a place of sleep or rest, from which the word cemetery is derived.

We do not weep when a loved one falls asleep at night, writes St. Basil, because we know he/she will wake up in the morning. Why should we weep hopelessly when a loved one falls asleep in the Lord, since we believe that Christ will raise him/her at the Second Coming. St. Cyril of Alexandria believes that Christ hesitates to use the word death here precisely because He created us for incorruptibility. At the Second Coming, He will indeed raise us incorruptible.

THE TWO NATURES OF JESUS

In the raising of Lazarus, we note how the two natures of Jesus—human and divine—work together without change and without confusion. As man, Christ wept at the death of His friend Lazarus, but as God with divine power, He raised him up and uttered one of His most amazing statements, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, though he may die, yet he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in me shall never die” (John 11:25-26).

“DO YOU BELIEVE THIS?” (John 11:26)

These have to be the greatest words ever spoken upon earth. They have pealed their way down through the centuries, ringing out their notes of joyous victory and forever banishing the darkness and hopelessness of the tomb. After saying these words to Martha, Jesus asks her, “Do you believe this?” He asks her personally if she believes that He is the resurrection and the life. For, you see, eternal life—life with God—is not for everybody. It is reserved for those who “live and believe” in Jesus. Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. So Jesus asks Martha, “Do you believe this?” Martha gives what should also be our answer, “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, He who is coming into the world” (John 11:27).

Jesus requires Martha’s faith before He proceeds with the resurrection of Lazarus. There is a kind of synergy involved here, whereby in order for God to perform a miracle, He must have the cooperation of our faith. “I am the resurrection and the life.... Do you believe this?”

“HE WEPT” (John 11:35)

The Apostle John mentioned that Jesus “wept” (John 11:35) in meeting with Mary, the sister of Lazarus. The tears shed by Jesus demonstrate that His humanity was complete. He was perfect man but also perfect God. As the hymn says,

O Lord, Thou has shed tears for Lazarus showing that Thou art man; and Thou hast raised him from the dead, O Master, showing to the peoples that Thou art the Son of God.

Elsewhere the troparia of the service link the healing power of Jesus with His Passion:

Shedding tears over Thy friend, O merciful Lord, Thou hast made the tears of Martha cease, and by Thy voluntary Passion Thou hast wiped away all tears from the face of Thy people. O God of our fathers, blessed art Thou.

JESUS WEPT FOR GOOD REASON

Jesus wept for good reason. Man was not formed to die. It was sin that introduced death and marred the otherwise beautiful image of God in us. "Where have they laid him?" asked Jesus. They said to Him, "Lord, come and see" (John 11:34). But what does Jesus see? He sees His friend Lazarus, the one whom he loves; the one to whom He has given the gift of life; the one whom He graced with the ineffable beauty of the divine image; He sees this friend wrapped in grave-clothes, locked up in a tomb, separated from his loved ones; and beginning to decompose. "He now stinks..." (John 11:39).

Then we come to the shortest but most moving verse in Scripture, "Jesus wept." Jesus is so moved by the death of His friend that He bursts into tears. Three times Jesus is described as weeping in the Scriptures. Once over a nation, when He wept over Jerusalem; once in the Garden of Gethsemane, when He wept over the sins of the world; and, in this instance over Lazarus, when He wept for the effect of sin, which is death. None of these tears were for Himself but for the human nature He had assumed. He wept for sin and what it had done to us. He wept to show His concern for all those who lose loved ones. He wept to show us that we, too, should weep with those who weep. He wept to show that to express our grief through tears is not unmanly or unchristian: the Son of God Himself wept. But these are more than just tears of sympathy. When He who is life weeps at the grave of a friend, it is then that victory over death begins. Jesus now proceeds from tears to action.

“TAKE AWAY THE STONE” (John 11:39)

The place where Lazarus was buried was a tomb with a stone before it. “Take away the stone,” Jesus said. Martha replied, “Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days.” One early French painting in the Louvre, on the raising of Lazarus, shows one of the bystanders holding his nose.

“DEEPLY MOVED IN SPIRIT” (John 11:33)

Next we read, “When Jesus saw Mary weeping and the Jews who came with her also weeping, He was deeply moved in spirit and troubled” (John 11:33). In these words, “deeply moved in spirit and troubled,” we see Jesus’ attitude toward death. He treats death not as a sometimes pleasant release from pain and despair; not as something inescapable, and therefore normal, natural, and therefore good. He treats death as an enemy, as a product of evil, as our “last enemy.” He shows us that death is not to be accepted as much as it is to be overcome. If Christ is life, then death is an enemy to be destroyed. Jesus, “deeply moved in spirit and troubled” as He stood before the tomb of Lazarus, shows us that death is abnormal, and, therefore, truly horrible. The Son of God is deeply angered by death—so angered that He submitted Himself to suffering and death on the Cross to overcome this enemy with His power and give us the fruits of His victory.

It is significant that Jesus was so agitated by the death of Lazarus that He “groaned in the spirit and was troubled” (John 11:33). This is a statement of the tremendously great pain Jesus felt when confronted with the death of His friend Lazarus. The word used in the original Greek is one of extreme pain: *enevrimisato*.

“WHERE HAVE YOU LAID HIM?” (John 11:34)

Jesus asks, “Where have you laid him?” (John 11:34). The question was not asked because Jesus did not know where Lazarus’ body was buried, but in order to show the poverty of His humanity, His divine kenosis, and to draw others to the place where the miracle would happen (St. Cyril of Alexandria).

“FATHER, I THANK YOU THAT YOU HAVE HEARD ME” (John 11:41-42)

Before the miracle, Jesus spoke a loud prayer to His Father: “Father, I thank you that you have heard me. And I know that you always hear me, but because of the people who are standing by, I said this, that they may believe that you sent me” (John 11:41-42). Jesus tells us that this prayer was made for the Jews, to help them understand that He came from the Father, that He is the Son of the Father and that He speaks for the Father (St. Andrew of Crete). Unlike the resurrection of the daughter of Jairus, which He forbade His disciples to broadcast, He performed the raising of Lazarus very publicly in order to declare His power to all. He wanted His people to know that He had indeed raised Lazarus.

“LAZARUS, COME FORTH!” (John 11:43-44)

The above prayer was meant for the Jews, but the words, “Lazarus, come forth!” were not a prayer but an authoritative command to Lazarus to come out of the tomb. He cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus, come forth.” (John 11:43-44). Thus with their own eyes those present saw Lazarus walk out of the tomb. With their noses they smelled the foul odor of death. With their own hands they lifted the rock blocking the tomb and loosed the shroud from his body. With their own ears they heard the command of Jesus, “Lazarus, come forth” (St. Gregory Palamas). This is not mythology but history—an eyewitness account of what happened.

The same voice which in the beginning said, “Let there be light, and there was light”—that same voice now says, “Lazarus, come out,” and Lazarus, dead four days, comes walking out of the tomb. “My Lord and my God!” Who can now doubt that Jesus is life? Who can now doubt that on the last day that very same voice shall speak again “when the trumpet sounds” and “those who are in the graves”—yes, even those who are in oceans and urns—“shall hear His voice and shall come forth”? Who can now doubt the words we confess in the Nicene Creed: “I believe...in the resurrection of the dead and in the life of the world to come”? Who can now doubt that our loved ones, whom we bedded into the earth, and we ourselves, shall one day come forth to meet the Risen Christ. “By raising Lazarus from the dead,” says the troparion of the day, “Christ confirmed the truth of the general resurrection.”

“UNBIND HIM AND LET HIM GO” (John 11:44)

Jesus then said to them, “Unbind him and let him go.” Those words, “unbind him and let him go,” remind us of how terribly we bind ourselves up in all sorts of compulsions and passions. One businessman said, “I’m like Lazarus, all wrapped up in worldly cares. I’m dead in spirit.”

Within the Church there are many persons who, though filled with new life from God, need to be unbound by loving friends. There are still strips of insecurity, fear, hurt, guilt, and hatred that need to be peeled away to allow freedom of movement and action. Jesus asks us to help unbind our brothers and sisters so that His new life can be formed in them. Jesus has given us many jobs to do, but none more important than that of being an “unwrapper” of those who are bound. Jesus asks for our cooperation in emancipating those who have been held fast in the power of the evil one.

Metropolitan Hierotheos explains further the importance of “unbinding” those whom God heals:

Christ raised Lazarus by the power of His divinity, but men had to unbind him, and Lazarus himself had to walk. God does not take the place of man, but he does what man is unable to do, while man must be responsive to God’s energy. If after the spiritual resurrection, which will take place through the sacraments of the Church, which themselves are gifts of Christ, our own zeal does not follow, then the Grace of Christ will be hidden by passions and man will again die. [\[lvii\]](#)

“I NEVER KNEW LAZARUS....”

“Do you really believe Jesus called Lazarus back from death?” someone was asked. He answered, “I never knew Lazarus, but I know what Jesus did for me. I understand Lazarus had been dead only four days. I had been dead four years and was in a bad state of decomposition. I had gone to pieces—I was both down and out. My family had collapsed. My business had gone to pieces. One by one my friendships had dissolved. Then Jesus spoke to me, and I became alive again. Now my family has come back. My friends recognize me. All things are made new. I do not know much about Lazarus, but one thing I do know—Jesus called me out of death into a new life.” Jesus did not say, “I *will be* the resurrection and the life” at some future date, but “I *am* the resurrection and the life” right now to those who “live and believe in me.”

Even today Jesus calls, “Lazarus, come out.” Those who hear His voice come walking out of real graves to a new life.

A HAPPY REUNION

What a happy reunion there must have been when Lazarus was restored to his sisters, Mary and Martha. What is this but a foretaste of what will happen on the last day when we shall be reunited not only with our precious Lord but also with all our departed loved ones to be with them forever. The deliverance of Lazarus from the grave encourages us to pray for our deliverance from our passions and sins. As one of the troparia of the feast sings:

O Lord, Thou hast said to Martha, "I am the Resurrection"; and Thou hast confirmed Thy words by actions, calling Lazarus from the tomb. Through my passions I am dead; raise me also, I beseech Thee, in thy tender love for mankind.

O Master, Thou hast raised a dead man bound in grave clothes.... I am held fast in the bonds of sin, raise me up and I shall sing: O God of our fathers, blessed art Thou.

“HE DELIVERED US FROM THE KINGDOM OF DARKNESS”

The words of St. Paul in Colossians 1:11-14 provide us with a deeper understanding of the Feast of the Raising of Lazarus and its magnificent icon:

May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in light. He has delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

DEAD “FOUR DAYS”

The Apostle John writes, “So when Jesus came, he found he had already been in the tomb four days” (John 11:17). And when Jesus commanded them to take the stone away from the cave where Lazarus had been buried, his sister Martha objected, “Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days” (John 11:39).

The “four days” is very significant since Jesus did not do anything without reason or purpose. There was a belief among the Jews at the time that a person was not really dead until after three days had passed. The four-day period of Lazarus’ death was meant to convince those present that Lazarus was truly dead. Just as Lazarus came back to life at the command of Jesus, so at the Second Coming of Jesus, all those in the tombs will rise from their graves “in the twinkling of an eye.”

WHO IS LAZARUS?

We ask: Who is this man in the tomb named Lazarus whom Jesus loves? For whom He weeps? To whom He speaks? Could I be that person? Could I be Lazarus? Could this story of resurrection be my story? Of course it is! Did not Jesus call me His friend when He said, “I have not called you servants but friends...”? Was not I created for fellowship and friendship with God: to know Him, love Him, serve Him, and be forever with Him? Did He not come to resurrect me not only from the final grave but also from the many graves in which I bury myself today?

After Lazarus came walking out of the tomb in the full glare of the noonday sun, one would have thought that everyone would have believed. But miracles are no cure for unbelief. Some will not believe even though one were to rise from the dead. It was the resurrection of Lazarus that brought out the crowds on Palm Sunday but it was also Lazarus’ resurrection that built the cross; for as the Apostle John writes, “From that day on they plotted His death” (John 11:53). It is the miracle of the raising of Lazarus which sparks off the attack on Christ that led to His death and exaltation.

CAIAPHAS' PROPHECY

The decision is made. Caiaphas, the high priest, unconsciously affirms that Jesus would die for all the people. The high priest in ancient times was believed to have the power of prophecy, and the Gospel testifies that Caiaphas' statement was true prophecy when he said:

“...it is expedient for you that one man should die for the people, and that the whole nation should not perish.” He did not say this on his own accord, but being high priest that year he prophesied that Jesus should die for the nation, and not for the nation only, but to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad (John 11:50-52).

Thus, toward the end of his life, Caiaphas, the high priest, who did not believe in the resurrection, affirmed what an angel had announced at the birth of Him whose name was Jesus, namely that:

“He will save His people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

The raising of Lazarus was a promise of more to come. It foreshadowed a greater miracle, Christ's own victory over the tomb. With Lazarus' resurrection “death begins to tremble.” This is why a spirit of great joy pervades the liturgy on the Saturday of Lazarus. In the early Church, Lazarus Saturday was considered a pre-announcement of Easter. It meant the beginning of the end of death. As the eighth ode of the Canon of Matins says, “Christ is coming to wake the dead Lazarus from sleep and to conquer death with life.”

MARY PREPARES FOR HIS BURIAL

As we know, each miracle in the Gospel of John is called a sign. The resurrection of Lazarus is indeed a sign or window through which we look to see Jesus as the conqueror of death. In raising Lazarus we witness a preliminary advance in the war against death, prior to the complete conquest on Pascha.

The two resurrections (Lazarus and Jesus) are brought together intimately through Mary. It was her love for Christ for raising Lazarus that led her to do a beautiful thing which was recorded and is read in the Gospel lesson on Palm Sunday. Immediately after the resurrection of Lazarus, a supper was given in His (Jesus') honor, at which Martha served, and Lazarus sat among the guests with Jesus. Then Mary "brought a pound of very costly perfume...anointed the feet of Jesus and wiped them with her hair, till the house was filled with the fragrance." When Judas objected, Jesus said, "...she is preparing me for my burial...."

THE GREAT DUEL

A great duel between light and darkness takes place during Great and Holy Week. But it takes place between two brilliant shafts of light: on the one end, “Lazarus, come out”; on the other end, “He is risen. He is not here. See the place where they laid Him!”

The open jaws of death can no longer swallow those who live and believe in Jesus, for He has declawed those jaws and transformed them into a beautiful gate where He now stands and invites us: “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”

DESCRIPTION OF THE ICON

All of what was just discussed verbally has been transformed into a visual icon called the Raising of Lazarus. It depicts iconographically much of the Gospel story of the Raising of Lazarus.

The original of this icon dates back to the second century. About forty copies have been found thus far in the Roman Catacombs. The majority of these early icons show only two figures: Lazarus and Jesus raising Him. Lazarus is presented as coming forth from the tomb with his grave-clothes. Beginning in the fourth century, the icon becomes more complex as more characters are added. Jesus Himself prepared for the miracle by arriving four days after the death of His friend. Jesus does not conceal this miracle as He did, for example, with the rising of Jairus' daughter, but performs it publicly in the presence of a multitude of people. Ouspensky writes, "It could be seen by everyone and the gestures of belief which some of the crowd make show that many of the Jews believed on Him.... Caves in the rock, like the cave of Lazarus, and the wall of the Town of Bethany (in the background) show that the action takes place in a cemetery outside the city walls. In the foreground, in front of a group of Apostles, is the Savior with the sisters of the dead Lazarus, Martha and Mary, at his feet. His aspect is regal and majestic; obeying His order to take away the stone, a man rolls aside the stone which closed the tomb.... Death itself obeys His commanding gesture and Lazarus, bound hand and foot with grave-clothes appears at the mouth of the cave.... One of those present holds the edge of his grave-clothes, 'Loose him and let him go.' The stench of decomposition still comes from his body after four days in the grave. It compels those who stand close by to cover their nose and mouth with their clothes. Therefore, this miracle was performed not only for His disciples, but also for the people as proof of the general resurrection of the dead."^[lviii]

Jim Forest adds that in older icons the cave opening is large enough only for the figure of Lazarus but in more recent years it has been enlarged to include Mary and Martha and people who believed that no power on earth is greater than that of Christ who can indeed raise the dead. He also mentions that the two mountain peaks in the icon on either side of the cave represent Mount Sinai and Mount Tabor.^[lix]

Note the following in the icon: Mary and Martha are bowed down before Christ; the white figure of Lazarus stands out against the darkness of the cave; the left hand of Jesus holds a scroll to signify His wisdom, His authority to give and teach the law; His right hand is extended in a gesture of speech toward Lazarus, implying His great command, “Lazarus, come forth!” (John 11:43).

The resurrection of Lazarus, together with the glorious resurrection of Christ, guarantees the truthfulness of Christ’s words in Revelation 21:4-5: “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes, there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain. For the former things have passed away.... Behold, I make all things new.”

St. Tikhon emphasizes the importance of meditating on eternity which this icon makes possible:

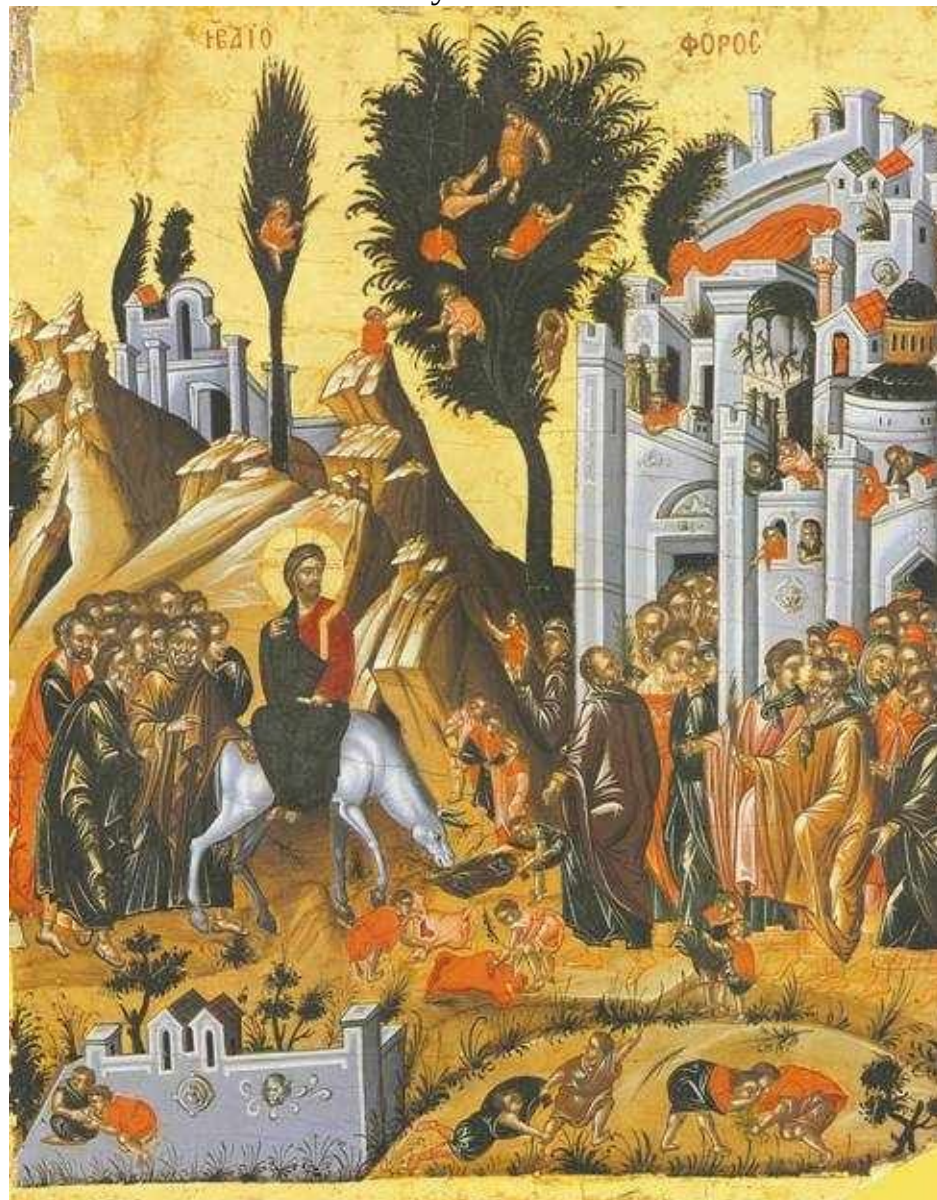
Meditate more often, O Christian, on eternity, that you may the better escape sin. One cannot think of eternity without sighing and fear. Meditation upon eternity makes weeping and tears sweet, it lightens every toil, it teaches us to accept with thanksgiving any temporal punishment, sorrow, offence, dishonor, banishment and death itself; it prevents us from falling into the snare of lawlessness. He who thinks of eternity will seek the word of God and instruction to salvation more than he seeks his daily food.

CHAPTER NINE

THE ICON OF JESUS' ENTRY INTO JERUSALEM: ITS MESSAGE

The Lord's expression is calm and divinely peaceful as he sits on the foal of an ass, entering Jerusalem on the eve of the Passion. Later, when He is mocked and buffeted in the courtyard of the High Priest, He keeps the same undisturbed tranquility, mingled with a deep sorrow at the consequences of sin for His creature. On the Cross He preserves His serene glory from before the ages, which He had with God before the world was made (John 17:5). Upon the Cross the Orthodox Church sees Him as King of Glory. And finally, when He is raised from the dead, there appears before us the same peaceful and, one might almost dare to say, sad face.... The Lord of life and death neither becomes angry when He is mocked—"He who was struck for the race of men and did not grow angry"—nor does He become proud when He is raised from the dead. Always and everywhere he preserves His divine serenity. Always and everywhere he saves the whole man and our life. [\[1x\]](#)

Jesus' Entry Into Jerusalem



In spite of the cheers at the raising of Lazarus and the waving of palms, Christ's "kingly" coming into Jerusalem, says St. Cyril of Alexandria, was done with the deepest humility.

Christ's entry into Jerusalem, like most events of the Lord, were prophesied in the Old Testament by the prophets. The prophet Zechariah prophesied: "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion! Shout aloud, O daughter of Jerusalem! Behold, your King is coming to you; He is just and having salvation. Lowly and riding on a donkey, a colt, the foal of a donkey. He shall speak peace to the nations; his dominion shall be 'from sea to sea', and from the River to the ends of the earth" (Zech. 9:9-10).

Christ's humility is seen from the fact that He came into Jerusalem "seated on a young donkey." St. John the Evangelist writes: "Then Jesus, when he had found a young donkey, sat on it" (Jn. 12:14). The Evangelist St. Matthew says that the Disciples brought a donkey and colt to Christ. "They brought the donkey and the colt, laid their clothes on them, and set Him on them" (Matt. 21:7). The Evangelist Luke says that Christ sat on the colt and not on the donkey (Lk. 19:35). The donkey followed behind. When Muslims conquer a nation, they immediately ban horses for the dhimmis, the conquered peoples, who are despised as slaves. They are allowed to ride only donkeys to show that the Muslims are the supreme race and religion.

Triumphant worldly generals and conquerors would ride into a city proudly on a horse or chariot, if not borne on shields and spears. Not so with Jesus, who enters Jerusalem with deepest humility, seated not on a proud stallion but on a humble colt.

The people bring palm fronds to wave as they greet Jesus, but this was the greeting the people gave to the great military leader, Judas Maccabeus, when he conquered the Syrian armies and took possession of Jerusalem (see 1 Macc. 13:51). Does Jesus want to be greeted as a military leader? The crowd expresses its hope that He will be. They greet Him as the one coming in the name of the Lord: "The King of Israel." They are looking for a Davidic king, a conqueror. But Jesus' wordless response is to take a humble animal, a young donkey, and ride into Jerusalem in fulfillment of the prophet Zechariah's words that a humble king, who would be pierced and slain, would come riding on a donkey's colt (Zech. 9:9).

A FESTIVE ICON

The Entry Into Jerusalem is a festive icon. Ouspensky and Lossky describe it as such:

Icons of the Entry of the Lord into Jerusalem are usually distinguished by a very triumphal and festive quality, in keeping with the character of the festival itself, which breaks through the stern and collected mood of the Great Lent and is thus a foretaste of Easter joy. The cheerful appearance of Jerusalem, often red or white, the bright colours of cloaks spread on the road of the procession give the icon a festive look. ^{[[lxi](#)]}

THE ROLE OF CHILDREN IN THE ICON

Their description goes on to mention the great role children play in this icon:

As a rule children play a great part in icons of the Entry Into Jerusalem. Usually they are cutting branches while they sit in the tree, spread garments in the Saviour's way and, together with the adults, welcome Him with palm branches in their hands. Although it is hard to imagine a crowd without children, especially on a feast day, the Evangelists do not mention their presence. Describing the entry into Jerusalem they say that "a very great multitude spread their garments in the way" (Matt. 21:8), but do not say they were children. Yet on the icons we see that only children and not adults are spreading garments. [\[lxii\]](#)

This is in keeping with what Jesus once said of children, "Assuredly, I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will by no means enter it" (Mark 10:15).

JUBILATION OVER THE RAISING OF LAZARUS

The immediate cause of the jubilation that precipitated the festive entry of Jesus into Jerusalem was the raising of Lazarus:

The next day a great multitude that had come to the feast, when they heard that Jesus was coming to Jerusalem, took branches of palm trees and went out to meet Him, and cried out: “Hosanna! Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord! The King of Israel!” Then Jesus when He had found a young donkey, sat on it; as it is written: “Fear not, daughter of Zion; Behold your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt....” Therefore the people who were with Him when He called Lazarus out of his tomb and raised him from the dead, bore witness. For this reason the people met Him, because they heard that He had done this sign (John 12:12-18).

As the Transfiguration was intended to strengthen the faith of the disciples that they may be able to endure the coming suffering and death of Jesus, so the miracle of the resurrection of Lazarus was intended to be for the disciples an irrefutable demonstration of Christ’s power and victory over death. Once again Christ tried to strengthen the faith of His disciples before His suffering, so that they might believe that He would rise from the grave as Lazarus did (Matt. 20:19; Mark 9:31; Luke 18:33). Of course, He did not succeed even though He had prophesied His resurrection.

THE PALM BRANCHES

The palm branch was a symbol of joy. They were used to welcome people of high rank. They served also as a symbol of valor to acknowledge heroic acts. Thus the people gathered at the city gates to welcome the Lord riding on a donkey as the conqueror of death.

Most icons depict the Savior riding sideways on the donkey. His head is turned slightly either towards the apostles walking behind Him or towards Jerusalem. His right hand either blesses or points to the crowd or the city.

One writer imagines what Jesus must have been thinking as he rode into Jerusalem:

Jesus appears completely concentrated on something else. He does not look at the excited crowd. He does not wave. He sees beyond all the noise and movement to what is ahead of him: an agonizing journey of betrayal, torture, crucifixion, and death. His unfocused eyes see what nobody around him can see; his high forehead reflects a knowledge of things to come far beyond anyone's understanding.

There is melancholy, but also peaceful acceptance. There is insight into the fickleness of the human heart, but also immense compassion. There is a deep awareness of the unspeakable pain to be suffered, but also a strong determination to do God's will. Above all, there is love, an endless, deep, and far-reaching love born from an unbreakable intimacy with God and reaching out to all. [\[lxiii\]](#)

THE SPREADING OF GARMENTS

According to the Bible, the spreading of garments (2 Kings 9:13) is an attribute of an anointed king. Since the Savior is the Anointed One whose “kingdom is not of this world” (John 18:36), the garments are spread before Him by children instead of by adults. It was the children who welcomed Him as the Anointed One.

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THE CHILDREN AND THEIR FATHERS

Metropolitan Hierotheos comments on the difference in response to Jesus between the children and their fathers:

The most paradoxical fact is that the infants, the children, were singing praises to Christ as God, while their fathers, the chief priests and scribes, were blaspheming him. St. Cyril of Alexandria provides excellent observations, underlining this difference. He says that the children recognized the Lord of creation by nature, while their fathers proved to be ungrateful. The children sang his praises as God, while their fathers crucified him. The children were singing hosanna, while their fathers were shouting “let him be crucified.” The young and ignorant are made wise, while the wise are blinded. The children threw their garments down for Christ to pass, while their fathers divided Christ’s garments. The children welcomed Christ with palms, their fathers came with swords. The children blessed, while their fathers blasphemed. The children as lambs received the shepherd, but their fathers like wolves devoured the Lamb. [\[lxiv\]](#)

In no other icon do children play such an important role.

A MOMENT OF SADNESS

There was a moment of sadness in this joyful Palm Sunday procession. When Jesus witnessed a panoramic view of Jerusalem on His way down from the Mount of Olives during the procession, He wept over the city because He foresaw the destruction which would befall it for not accepting the Messiah (Luke 19:41-44).

The pilgrim nun Egeria describes Palm Sunday in Jerusalem in AD 383. She narrates for us a procession from the Mount of Olives, down the hill, across the valley, and into the gates of Jerusalem. This journey imitates the procession of Jesus and His followers, as described especially in John's gospel, on the day after His stay in Bethany, six days before Passover (John 12:1-36). This same ritual is followed today in Jerusalem when on this day the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem marches on the same route with his faithful and many pilgrims from all over the world.

THE WORDS “HOSANNA IN THE HIGHEST” AND “BLESSED IS HE WHO COMES IN THE NAME OF THE LORD”

The word “Hosanna” used on Palm Sunday is Hebrew and means “Save, I pray.” It comes from Psalm 118:25-27. It is a hymn that is offered to God and is interpreted “save us.” “In the highest” shows that praises to God are offered not only on earth but also in the heights by the angels (St. Gregory Palamas).

The word “blessed”—“blessed be the one who comes in the name of the Lord”—is also used on Palm Sunday to commemorate Jesus who comes “in the name of the Lord.” St. Nicodemos the Hagiorite says that this word has a double meaning. It is used to indicate the holiness which originates from God and is given by God to men. Likewise, the word blessing is used to indicate our glorification and thanksgiving as in the psalm: “Bless the LORD, O my soul; and all that is within me, bless his holy name” (Psalm 103:1).

Both these expressions have deep Christological meaning. The phrase “Hosanna in the highest” points to the lofty name of the Godhead, while the phrase “Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord” points to the coming of the Messiah, now entering Jerusalem on a lowly colt.

THE TREE

The tree in the icon has a double meaning. Its primary purpose is that it was the source of the palm branches which the people carried. Some icons show a child on the tree breaking branches. Its second purpose is that it represents the “tree” (cross) outside the city walls on which Jesus was crucified.

One of the Orthodox hymns for Palm Sunday says,

He who sits upon the throne of the cherubim, for our sake sits upon a donkey; and coming to his voluntary Passion, today he hears the children cry “Hosanna!”

“WHO IS THIS?”

The Gospel lesson that is read in the Matins service on Palm Sunday (Matthew 21:1-11, 15-17) speaks of Jesus' entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday: “And when He was come into Jerusalem, all the city was moved saying, Who is this?”

Who is this? It was the question Pilate asked when Jesus stood before him. It was the same question Saul asked when he first met Jesus on the road to Damascus when he cried out, “Who art Thou, Lord?”

“Who are you?” asked the high priest as Jesus stood before him on trial. “I adjure thee by the living God, that Thou tell us whether Thou art the Christ, the Son of God?” Jesus answered, “I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the power and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:62). Then the high priest shouted, his voice shrill with victory, “What further need have we of witnesses? He has blasphemed making Himself equal with God. Let us put him to death.”

Who is this?

Twice in Christ's ministry the voice of God the Father was heard from heaven, telling us who this Jesus is. At Christ's baptism the voice of the Father said from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, in Whom I am well-pleased.” Multitudes of people heard it, and it was recorded for history to know. At the Transfiguration within the hearing of three of His disciples, the voice of the Father was heard again saying, “This is my beloved Son; listen to him.”

One day Philip said to Jesus, “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father.... I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:8-10).

WHO IS HE FOR YOU?

This, then, is who Jesus is. True God and true man in the same person. Our one and only Savior. The Way, the Truth, the Life. But the really important question is, “Who is Jesus for you?” “Who do you say that I am?” What have you made of Him? Is He the Son of God for you? Is He the Savior for you? Is He the Way for you? Is He the Truth for you? Is He the Life for you? Is He the door for you?

This is the Jesus who comes riding into the Jerusalem of your soul and mine every Palm Sunday. He comes to establish a throne where He may reign and make the kingdom of God a reality in each one of us.

The Church gives us palms on this day. We are to use these to acknowledge that Jesus is indeed our personal king and Lord. Technically, the palms are to be distributed in the Matins Service so that worshippers may be holding them during the liturgy to welcome Christ when He comes as our King in the reading of the Word and in the Eucharist.

Who is this? I pray that we answer that question as Peter did, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God,” lest when we appear before Him on the last day He say of us, “Who is this? I never knew you. Depart from me.”

WHO IS IN THE SADDLE?

Emerson said once, “Things are in the saddle and ride mankind.” It is because things are in the saddle and ride all of us that there is no peace or contentment in life. These “things” are the sinful passions and compulsions. For the one who belongs in the saddle is the one who came riding into Jerusalem: The Prince of Peace, the Son of Glory, my Lord, my God, and my King!

“Hosanna in the highest! Blessed is He Who comes in the name of the Lord!”

Being borne upon a throne in Heaven, and upon a colt on the earth, O Christ God, Thou didst accept the praise of the Angels and the laudation of the children as they cried to Thee: Blessed is He that cometh to recall Adam. **Palm Sunday Kontakion**

CHAPTER TEN

THE ICON OF THE ASCENSION SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

The Ascension



Just as the Lord Jesus came to earth in a supernatural way so He left in a supernatural way. One of the best descriptions of the Ascension is found in Acts 1:9-11, “And when he (Jesus) had said this, as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, ‘Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven.’”

ORIGIN OF THE FEAST

Until the late fourth century the ascent of Christ into heaven and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost were celebrated together at the end of the 50-day period of Pentecost. The development of a separate celebration for the Ascension on the fortieth day after Easter began in Syria and Asia Minor in the latter part of the fourth century and became an almost universal practice by the seventh or eighth century.

A PRELUDE TO PENTECOST

Seen in the light of the fact that the Ascension is a prelude to Pentecost, the early practice of the Church seems to make sense. Jesus ascends to heaven to change the form by which He will be present among us. After Pentecost, He will work through us, the Trinity-filled members of His Body, the Church.

The fact that the Ascension was separated from Pentecost indicates the great importance the early Christians attached to the Ascension, which celebrates the completion of salvation through Christ and the taking of our humanity to the throne of God. Man is now seated at the right hand of the Father in the person of the Incarnate Son, our great High Priest, who serves as the one great Mediator and provides access to the divine life. This is the apex of Christian humanism. “God becomes man that man may become god” (St. Athanasius).

HE IS STILL WITH US

Does the Ascension mean that Jesus is no longer with us? No. The Ascension does not mean that Jesus is no longer with us. As the following hymn of the Church states, Jesus continues to be with us:

When You had fulfilled for us your dispensation, and united the things on earth with the things of heaven, You, O Christ our God, ascended into glory, yet without being parted from those who love You, for You remain with them inseparably. —**An Orthodox Prayer for the Feast of the Ascension**

As Paul Evdokimov writes, “The Ascension does away with the historical visibility (of Christ)... But Pentecost restores to the world the interiorized presence of Christ and reveals Him now...*within* His disciples” (*L’ Esprit Saint*).

WHY DID HE GO AWAY?

Why did Jesus go away when there was so much He could have done here on earth? The answer was given by Jesus Himself: “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send Him to you” (John 16:7). Jesus tells us here that His human form will be replaced by the presence of the Counselor, the Paraclete, the Spirit of Truth, the Helper, the Holy Spirit. He will bring us into much closer contact with Jesus than His human form could bring about. If Jesus had remained on earth, we could never have gotten any closer to Him than the touch of a hand, or the sound of a voice, or the thrill of an embrace, which is far below the degree of intimacy that God wants with the soul or the soul desires of God.

But if He ascended into heaven, He would be able to come and abide in each one of us in all His fullness so that His mind would be our mind and His life our life. Is it not the Holy Spirit, for example, who effects the change of the bread and wine in the liturgy and thus brings Christ to us today in the sacrament of Holy Eucharist? And by receiving Christ in this sacrament He comes to fill our life with His presence. Now that Christ abides in us all, He gives us a very special challenge: to glorify Him in the world today through our lives; to become visible Christs, living and working as His agents, His ambassadors, and His people as the body of Christ and the *laos tou theou* (the people of God).

DOES THE ASCENSION MEAN THAT JESUS WAS NOT IN HEAVEN WHILE ON EARTH?

The Ascension does not mean that the Son of God was not in heaven while He was on earth. As God He was present everywhere, including heaven. The Ascension took place for a very special reason: He ascended with our human nature. His purpose was to elevate our humanity to the throne of God. The second person of the Holy Trinity is now one of us. We have a High Priest who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses. Let us then draw near to the throne of God boldly that we may obtain mercy (Hebrews). As we pray in the prayer before Holy Communion, “Thou who sittest on high with the Father and art here invisibly present with us.”

HAS ANYONE ELSE EVER ASCENDED TO HEAVEN?

Jesus Himself tells us that no one has ever ascended into heaven besides the Son of God. “No one has ascended to heaven but the one who came down from heaven, the Son of Man who is in heaven” (John 3:13). The Theotokos was assumed into heaven by Jesus who is Himself the source of grace. As we saw in the Dormition icon, He is carrying His Mother to heaven in His bosom. Through the Ascension, Jesus has opened the door to heaven for us.

The Old Testament teaches that Elijah “ascended” into heaven, but if we pay careful attention to the text as well as to the Church fathers, we find that the text says, “Suddenly a chariot of fire appeared with horses of fire and separated the two of them; and Elijah was taken up by a whirlwind *as if* to heaven” (2 Kings 2:11). But about Christ’s Ascension the Scripture says, “So then after the Lord had spoken to them, He was received up into heaven, and sat down at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). There is a huge difference between “as if to heaven” and “into heaven.” At any rate, the Son of God is correct when He says that no one ever ascended into heaven except the Son of Man. The icon itself shows Jesus ascending into heaven bodily.

According to another tradition that is disputed by some but held by many Church fathers, Elijah (Elias), having risen to heaven on a chariot of fire, will have to return to earth with Enoch to bear witness and die as a martyr at the end of time (Rev. 11:3-10). See footnote for Revelation 11:3 in the Orthodox Study Bible.

There is a Muslim tradition according to which Mohammed ascended into heaven from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, but there is absolutely no factual basis for such a tradition. It is a Muslim attempt to elevate Mohammed to a level equal to and surpassing Jesus. The icon clearly shows that the twelve disciples, the Theotokos, and the angels were eyewitnesses to the Ascension. In contrast, there were no eyewitnesses to the so-called ascension of Mohammed. Thus we are not teaching mythology but history. The Ascension of Jesus is an historical event. It occurred on the Mount of Olives in Jerusalem “under Pontius Pilate,” with eyewitnesses.

HE STAYED WITH THEM FORTY DAYS

The New Testament says that the Ascension of Jesus took place forty days after the Resurrection. According to biblical language “forty days” is an expression not always to be taken literally; it may mean a considerable but limited period of time. Be that as it may, we are told that Jesus remained with His disciples for “forty days” following the Resurrection. There are two reasons why He remained with them during this period.

First, that they might be convinced beyond all doubt that He had actually risen from the dead. If He had appeared to them only once, people might say in ages to come that the single appearance of the resurrected Christ was a figment of someone’s imagination, but His several appearances, under many different circumstances and in many different places establish the reality of his resurrection beyond doubt.

The second reason for this wait of “forty days” was for the sake of instruction. Why was it that the disciples understood so much more about Jesus after His resurrection than they did before? No doubt it was through the Holy Spirit, who came to them on Pentecost; but it was also through the instruction Jesus gave them during these forty days. “To them He presented himself alive after His passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days, and *speaking of the kingdom of God*” (Acts 1:3). In one of the Gospels we are told that beginning with Moses and all the prophets, Jesus during those “forty days” interpreted to them all the things written about Him in the Scriptures. Following these many post-resurrection appearances and instructions to His disciples, Jesus “led them out as far as Bethany...blessed them and parted from them” (Luke 24:50-51).

DO THE PROPHETS FORETELL THE ASCENSION?

There are several prophecies that foretell the Ascension in the Old Testament. We read in Psalm 47:5, “God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.” Another psalm says, “He bowed the heavens, and came down with darkness under His feet. And He rode upon a cherub and flew, He flew upon the wings of wind” (Psalm 18:9-10).

In addition, the Ascension is mentioned many times in the New Testament. Speaking to His disciples before the Passion, Jesus said, “I came forth from the Father and have come into the world. Again, I leave the world and go to the Father” (John 16:28). In another situation Jesus said, “No one has ascended to heaven but the one who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of man who is in heaven” (John 3:13). St. Paul writes, “God was manifested in the flesh, justified in the Spirit, seen by the angels, preached among the Gentiles, believed on in the world, received up in glory” (1 Tim. 3:16). And Jesus Himself speaks triumphantly about His Ascension when He says, “To him who overcomes I will grant to sit with me on my throne, as I also overcame and sat down with my Father on His throne” (Rev. 3:21). Thus the Ascension of Christ is clearly taught both in the Old and New Testaments.

HE ASCENDED WITH HIS BODY

The Scripture specifically states that Jesus ascended *with His body*, as we note in the icon. The Holy Theotokos as well as the apostles were there as eyewitnesses and saw this event. There were those in the early Church who believed that the body was evil. The Manichaens as well as Origen taught that Jesus cast off His body like a burden when He ascended into heaven. Only then was He able to rest in the bosom of His Heavenly Father. The Monophysites believed that the human nature of Jesus was absorbed by the divine nature and so the human nature turned into divinity. This is not the teaching of the Scripture and the Church. It is a total distortion of the truth.

The Church has always taught that Christ came to cleanse us of sin and raise us to heaven through the process of theosis or deification which was fulfilled at the Ascension. The body is not discarded at the Ascension. It is not considered evil. It is not the prison of the soul which must be cast off and destroyed in order for man's soul to be released and liberated. The body is sanctified, deified, Christified, and elevated to heaven to sit enthroned next to God the Father. That is clearly our destiny. The end of man is not a hole in the ground six feet deep, but a home in the heavens eternal with God. That is our destiny—yours and mine! In the words of St. Paul:

But God, who is rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:4-7)

THE COMPLETION OF THE LORD'S MISSION

The Ascension highlights two important facts: the completion of our Lord's earthly ministry as well as the inauguration of the ministry of the Church. It is the jewel of all the feasts of the Lord. It invites us to spiritual fullness and perfection as we participate in Christ's Ascension in order to experience our own Ascension. It is reaching our goal, i.e., arriving at the top of the Ladder of Divine Ascent and being welcomed by the Lord into His eternal Kingdom.

Jesus often spoke of His coming Ascension. Here are some instances:

Father...I glorified you on earth by accomplishing the work that you gave me to do. Now glorify me, Father, with you, with the glory that I had with you before the world began (John 17:4-5).

I...have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father (John 16:28).

Father...I have revealed your name to those whom you gave me (John 17:6).

Father...I made known to them your name and I will make it known, that the love with which you loved me may be in them and I in them (John 17:25-26).

As one theologian said, "He (Jesus) gave a name to the incomprehensible puzzle behind all things. He called it 'Father' and He invited us too to whisper into the divine darkness 'Our Father.'"

I pray for them...Holy Father, keep them in your name...keep them from the evil one...consecrate them in truth....(John 17:9-26).

Finally, Jesus gave us all that He had: "This is my body that is broken for you" (1 Cor. 11:24). There was nothing more He could do.

ST. EPIPHANIOS OF CYPRUS ON THE ASCENSION

Jesus was the good shepherd who cared for each one of the sheep entrusted to His care. When one sheep was lost, He left the other 99 in the fold in the middle of the night and went out to search for the one lost. And when He found it, He put it on His shoulder and came back rejoicing.

St. Epiphanius used this beautiful parable in his homily on the Ascension to describe the completion of our Lord's ministry on earth. He describes Jesus as saying to His Father when He ascends to heaven: "Father, I found the lost sheep which the deceitful serpent beguiled with crafty artifices, suggesting evil paths and corrupting the purity of its knowledge of God with the clay of polytheism."

He depicts Jesus as saying to His Father that He found the lost sheep choking in the mire, and after grasping it with the right hand of His divinity, He washed it in the water of the Jordan, filled it with the fragrance of the Holy Spirit, and by His Resurrection and Ascension has now come to offer this rational sheep to His Father as one of the jewels of His earthly ministry.

LIFT UP THE GATES...

An Old Testament reference to the Ascension is Psalm 24:7-10,

Lift up the gates, O you rulers and be lifted up you everlasting doors, and the king of glory shall come in. The rulers ask: “Who is this king of glory?” and the answer given the first time is: “The Lord strong and mighty, the Lord mighty in battle,” and the second time, “the Lord of the powers, he is the king of glory.”

This text is not read during the Ascension service but it had a great influence in images associated with the Ascension, both in homilies and icons. In fact, in some versions of the icon, we note in the upper part, just above the mandorla, the gates of heaven opening before the ascending king of glory.

Psalm 47:5 is another Old Testament reference to the Ascension which is actually sung as an antiphon in the Little Entrance of the Liturgy for the Ascension feast to confirm its fulfillment: “God has gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet.” In some icons we see depictions of angels blowing trumpets in accordance with the words of this verse.

HE WILL COME AGAIN

We read in Acts 1:11, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus who was taken up from you into heaven will come in the same way as you saw Him go into heaven.”

These very words are engraved in a famous ninth century mosaic of the ascending Christ in Thessalonika’s Cathedral of Santa Sophia. They are words that must have inspired St. Gregory Palamas when he preached in that cathedral as Archbishop of that city.

It was a great day for the Church when a cloud received Jesus out of the sight of the disciples and He ascended into heaven. It will be an even greater day for the world when the same ascended Christ will return in glory. Although judgment is not mentioned by the angels in Acts 1:11, it is implied and flushed out in the hymns of the feast, such as the following:

Having mounted upon heaven’s clouds, O Christ, Thou didst leave peace unto those upon the earth; and Thou didst ascend and sit at the Father’s right hand on high.... Wherefore Thou now waitest till the last consummation, when Thou shalt return to judge all mankind upon the earth. O Thou most righteous Judge and Lord, since thou art a most merciful God, do Thou spare our souls and do Thou grant to us, Thy lowly servants, the pardon of our failings and our sins.

Thus, this same Jesus who ascended into heaven will one day return. “They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30). In the meantime, between the Ascension and the Second Coming, there is no vacuum or emptiness because the same Christ is present through His Church. Through prayer, His words, and the sacraments we can experience His Ascension, as well as the power and glory of His presence. In fact, prayer is exactly that: an ascension to God. So is liturgy.

In the words of Ouspensky, “The ascending Savior Himself leaving the earthly world in the flesh does not abandon it in His divinity, does not desert the inheritance gained by His blood—the Church, ‘in no wise being parted...but remaining (with us) inseparably.’ ‘And, lo, I am with you always even to the end of the world’” (Matt. 28:20). ^[lxv]

THE FEAST OF MAN'S THEOSIS

The Ascension of Christ has great meaning and importance because it has much to say about the deification of each Christian. It is precisely the Feast of the Ascension that the fathers connect with the deification of man. All souls will be resurrected on the day of Christ's Second Coming, both the righteous and the sinners, but not all will be taken up. Only the righteous, the deified, will be found worthy of this great experience. In the words of St. Paul, "And those who have died in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:16-17). Thus, all will be resurrected at the Second Coming but not all will ascend—only those who are deified (Christified). Heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people. In the words of Metropolitan Hierotheos:

The Feast of the Ascension filled the world with rejoicing, because when Christ opened the heavens, He showed us an extraordinary sight, 'our flesh lifted up on the kingly throne' at the right hand of God the Father. So the value of the Ascension is in the fact that the human flesh which was deified by its union with the divine nature of the Word, is seated on the kingly throne, at the right hand of God the Father. [\[lxvi\]](#)

HE WAS LIFTED UP

The words “and he was lifted *up*” do not mean merely that Jesus was elevated so many feet above sea level. They mean that through His ascension Jesus entered a higher existence, a different realm of life, heaven.

It is interesting to note that when one does go “up” into outer space, one enters a new and different realm than what we know on earth. For example, scientists tell us that by the end of this century we will be able to break the light barrier just as we did the sound barrier. In other words, man will be able to travel at the speed of light, i.e., 186,000 miles per second. To reach the nearest star at that speed would require ten years: five years to go and five to return. We here on earth will be ten years older when the astronauts return but they will be only ten days older.

Why? Because when they break the light barrier, they reach the point where time almost ceases to exist. Time in space is not as it is here on earth. It is a completely different realm. So it is that when the New Testament says that Jesus “was lifted *up*,” it means to say that He entered
a new realm of life completely different from what we know here on earth.

God was manifested in the flesh,
Justified in the Spirit,
Seen by angels,
Preached among the Gentiles,
Believed on in the world,
Received up in glory. —1 Timothy 3:16

“A CLOUD TOOK HIM OUT OF THEIR SIGHT”

In the Bible, a cloud is a sign of the presence of God. It was a cloud which enveloped Mt. Sinai as God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. When Jesus was transfigured we read that “a bright cloud overshadowed them” (Matt. 17:5). It was probably from a cloud that the Father’s voice came when Jesus was baptized, saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am pleased.” So when we read in Acts, “A cloud took him out of their sight,” it means that Jesus entered into the very presence of God.

AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD

St. Mark mentions the ascension in his Gospel in one single sentence. He says that Jesus “was taken up into heaven and sat at the right hand of God” (Mark 16:19). The expression “at the right hand of God” is not to be taken literally. God has no “right” hand or “left” hand. These are human descriptions. They speak rather of the divinity of Jesus. For who can sit at the right hand of a king but one equal in authority, another king! The ascended Christ takes His rightful place of glory and honor in heaven, sharing in the sovereignty of God over heaven and earth. He sits upon the throne of the universe. No matter what happens, He is always in control.

Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. —
Phil. 2:9-11

HE FILLS ALL THINGS

St. Paul says, “He (Jesus) ascended above all the heavens, *that he might fill all things*” (Eph. 4:10). The New English Bible translates these last words: “So that he might fill the universe.” When Jesus ascended into heaven, He was freed from all the limitations of space and time. He was freed to be lovingly and powerfully present with every person, in every place, in every age. Filling the universe with His presence, Jesus is now closer to us than ever before.

This is brought out beautifully in one of the icons of the Ascension where the iconographer depicts the ascending Christ as growing larger and larger until the earth itself becomes no bigger than a golf ball which He holds in His hand. In other words, through His ascension Christ now transcends space and time as ruler of the universe.... “He (God) raised him from the dead and made him sit at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come; and he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things for the Church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:20-23). The Church is now called upon to continue the mission of Christ. It was empowered to do so on Pentecost. “You are to be my witnesses,” said Jesus.

A FRIEND WAITS FOR US IN HEAVEN

Having ascended into heaven, Jesus passed into another world, spiritual, invisible, yet just as real as the world in which we live today. This tells us that man may be at home somewhere else in this vast universe other than on earth. “I go to prepare a place for you that where I am there you may be also,” said Jesus. The Ascension gives us the certainty that we have a friend not only on earth but also in heaven. He is our forerunner (*prodromos*) who has gone on before us to prepare for our arrival. For us to die now is not to go out into the dark; it is to enter His closer presence.

If someone were to find the cure for cancer, there would be great rejoicing. Yet there is one who has found the cure for something far worse than cancer: sin and death. His Resurrection and Ascension have shown us that out there in God’s great universe beyond this tiny planet called Earth, man will someday go and find a home with a friend. As Jesus said in His great priestly prayer: “Father, I desire that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am.”

HE UNDERSTANDS US

The Ascension means that the occupant of the eternal throne of heaven understands our human problems. Jesus, who sits there now, is complete God and complete man, like unto us in everything except sin. He knows how we feel. He knows our problems. He knows our weaknesses, our temptations, our sorrows, and our burdens. He is “a man of sorrows acquainted with grief.” He knows our potential. In fact, He has given us our potential, *i.e.* theosis. This should give us confidence in the *humanity of God*. The human Jesus ascended to the divine throne. If it is true that people are divine (made in the image of God), it is also true that God is human. This is why the author of the Book of Hebrews writes:

For we have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:15-16).

“WHILE HE BLESSED THEM ...”

St. Luke records that as Jesus was ascending into heaven, He raised His hands in blessing: “Then he led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up his hands he blessed them. While he blessed them, he parted from them” (Luke 24:50-51). His whole life among us was a blessing. He lived as a blessing. He died as a blessing. He rose as a blessing. He left His followers with a blessing. In almost every icon He is pictured with His hand lifted up in blessing. He is blessing us as our high priest. It is His blessing that the priest bestows upon the congregation when he blesses us with the words, “Peace be with you.” And now through His Church He seeks to enrich all of us with the greatest blessing there is: the promise of pardon and peace and life eternal.

A CONTINUING ASCENSION

Our Lord promised the disciples that they would see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man. What do these words mean: "...the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man"? They refer to the continued presence of Christ in the world even after His Ascension. Christ's coming into the world marks the opening of heaven. He came down the ladder from heaven and ever since then heaven has remained open.

We may say that Christ Himself is the ladder—the only way to the Father and to heaven. There is a constant stream of traffic on that ladder. Those angels ever going up and coming down are our prayers. Up to gain help and inspiration—down to bring a little bit of heaven, a breath of Godly air, into this world of struggling humanity. "Prayer," writes St. John of the Ladder, "is a continuous ascension to heaven." We may add, so is the liturgy and so is the reading of God's Word—a continuous ascension to where God is. In the words of St. Gregory the Theologian, "And if He ascend up into heaven, ascend with Him."

HE PRAYS FOR US

Jesus ascended into heaven not to end His work for us but to continue it—this time as our great intercessor before the throne of God. Even before His Ascension, Jesus prayed to God for the souls of His children. He prayed for His disciples, especially for Peter that his faith might not fail him. In His sublime prayer at the Last Supper, He prayed for all Christian believers, past, present, and future. Now that He is in heaven, He continues this intercession, He “...who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us” (Rom. 8:34).

“Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Heb. 7:25).

He stands in the presence of God in our behalf (Heb. 9:24). In Him we have an advocate in the presence of God (1 John 2:1). An advocate is much like a defense attorney. Jesus ascended into heaven with his human body. He now stands before the throne of God representing all humanity, as our defense attorney. We have the greatest and the most eminently qualified defense attorney in the universe pleading our case! Yet to plead our case successfully before the Father, He needs our support. He needs the best evidence we can give Him: our saving faith, our daily repentance, our deeds of love!

If it helps to know at times that some wife or little child or blessed mother or father or true friend is praying for us; if the thought of those prayers helps and strengthens and purifies, so that our hearts are brave again and strong, how much more will it help us to remember that the Ascended Christ is now our great intercessor in heaven ever praying for each one of us.

HUMANITY ASCENDS WITH CHRIST

Jesus came down from heaven as the Eternal Son of the Father, but when He went back to the seat of honor and glory at God's right hand, He took with Him our human nature. He returned to His Father as God-man. It was our nature, in everything except sin, that sat down at the right hand of God. The Son of God descended to become one of us and ascended to enable us to ascend with Him.

Through the ascension and enthronement of Christ, all human nature has been enthroned at the right hand of the Father. Since the manhood of Jesus was taken up to the heavenly places, our manhood will also be taken up. This is humanism—Christian humanism at its best. The ascension is proof that man was made for heaven not for the grave, for glory not for corruption.

In the ascended Jesus, then, we behold our destiny, the true destiny of all Christians. In our present weakness, frailty, ignorance, and suffering, it may seem too great a destiny for us. Yet the same power that raised and exalted Jesus will also raise and exalt us. We know now that a human nature like ours, and therefore representative of ours, has penetrated behind the last barrier and crossed the last threshold which separates the human from the divine. And because we are one in Him and with Him, His achievement is ours. St. Paul does not hesitate to describe Christians as “enthroned above the heavens, in Christ Jesus.”

FOR US

Everything Jesus did, He did for us. For us He ascended into heaven. For us He sits at the right hand of the Father. For us He pleads and prays. For us He advocates. For us He has gone to prepare a place in the presence of God. For us He has opened heaven that our prayers may ever ascend to Him. For us He shall come again to take us unto Himself that we may ever be with the Lord.

EYES FIXED ON JESUS

The icon of the Ascension shows that the disciples were astonished and watched with joy and wonder as Jesus ascended into heaven. St. Luke tells us, “Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up...” (Acts 1:9-10). Their eyes were riveted upon Jesus as He ascended.

This posture shows how our eyes must also be fixed on Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. It is in this light that we should view the exhortation of the priest during the liturgy, “Let us lift up our hearts...” The eye of the soul—our *nous*—should always be fixed on Him. For, as St. Paul says, our citizenship is not on earth but in heaven from which “we also eagerly await for the Savior, the Lord Jesus” (Phil. 3:20). Elsewhere St. Paul urges us, “Fix your mind on things above, not on things on earth” (Col. 3:2). The appeal the Church addresses to us on the Feast of the Ascension is personal and existential: “Come, let us rise and turn our eyes and thoughts on high, concentrating our looks as well as our feelings...let us imagine ourselves to be on the Mount of Olives gazing at the Redeemer being borne on clouds” (an Ascension Troparion).

The Church calls on us to keep our eyes focused on Christ as we go through life. The Greek word for man—*anthropos*—means a creature that looks up. In the words of St. Leo the Great, “The Ascension of Christ is our elevation, and whither the glory of the head has preceded by anticipation, the hope of the body too is called.” A Christian, then, is a creature who looks up. For our destiny is up—all the way up to the throne of God.

THE ICON OF THE ASCENSION

The icon of the Ascension was established in the sixth century and was depicted in the domes of churches by the ninth century. Why the dome? Because it is the highest point of the church building.

The upper region of the icon depicts Christ enthroned against the background of an oval mandorla, which expresses His divinity. The halo is inscribed with the Cross and the words *Ho On* (“The One Who Is”). Christ’s right hand is raised in blessing (Luke 24:50), and in His left hand He holds a scroll, the symbol of His wisdom and teaching authority, which He continues to exert through the Church.

TWO ANGELS

Two angels appeared with Him as He ascended—the same angels who sang praises to Him at His Incarnation; the same angels who ministered to Him as he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane; those same angels were present also at His Ascension. As the Prophet King David writes, “He mounted the cherubim and flew; he soared on the wings of the wind” (Psalm 18:10). The angels are not supporting the mandorla since our Savior is ascending by His own power and does not need their assistance. In some versions of the Ascension icon, as already stated, angels are depicted blowing trumpets in accordance with the words of the antiphon, “God is gone up with a shout, the LORD with the sound of a trumpet” (Psalm 47:5).

St. Paul is pictured as a spectator at the head of a group of disciples on the left side of the icon. Historically, however, he could not have been with the disciples at the Ascension. He is included to represent all who believe in Christ without having been present at this moment. The disciples appear rather disoriented since they have not yet been strengthened by the special power of the Holy Spirit (Pentecost).

The Theotokos occupies a prominent position at the lower center of the icon with two angels standing by her side. She is seen as not only the Mother of the Savior, but as the Mother of the Church, since she served as God’s bridge to humanity. The attention of the disciples is divided. Some are looking at Mary; others are watching the ascending Christ, while Mary is looking toward the viewer with her hands raised in *orans* (prayer). She alone among the disciples carries an expression of calmness and serenity at what is happening. Her calm expression is one that is born of complete trust in Her Son as expressed in three verses from the Akathistos Hymn:

Hail, heavenly ladder by which God came down.
Hail, bridge leading men from earth to heaven.
Hail, pillar of fire, guiding those in darkness.

As an image of the Church, Mary stands directly below Christ, her hands lifted up in prayer as she intercedes to Him in our behalf. Although Scripture says nothing about Mary being present at the Ascension, tradition teaches firmly

that she was present. The 9th canticle of the Canon says, “Rejoice, Thou Mother of Christ our God, seeing with the apostles Him Whom Thou didst engender ascending to heaven and glorifying Him.”

Ouspensky and Lossky describe the topography of the icon:

According to the Holy Scriptures (Acts 1:12), the Ascension of our Lord took place on Mount Olivet or the Mount of Olives. Therefore in the icon the action takes place either at the summit of the mount...or in a hilly landscape. To designate the Mount of Olives, some olive trees are at times depicted. In accordance with the special service of the festival, the Saviour Himself is represented as ascending in glory sometimes sitting on a richly ornamented throne. [\[lxvii\]](#)

The throne is not a biblical symbol for Christ, who came to wash feet, not to be served but to serve. He came to reign not from a throne but from the cross. By far the best throne for Christ is a humble and repentant heart.

Thus, the Feast of the Ascension is consummated. The whole process of salvation: birth, passion, death, and resurrection are completed with the Ascension. In the words of the Kontakion:

Thou hadst fulfilled for us Thy dispensation, and united the things in earth with the things in Heaven, Thou, O Christ our God, didst ascend into glory, in no wise being parted from those that love Thee, but Thou didst remain with them inseparably and proclaim to them: I am with you, no one is against you.

ST. AUGUSTINE ON THE ASCENSION

“Our Savior has ascended into heaven, beloved brethren, but let us therefore not be troubled on earth. May our minds be there, and here will be peace. In the meanwhile we shall ascend with Christian heart, that when the day of His promise will have come, we shall follow also in body. Nevertheless, brethren, we must know that with Christ ascends neither pride, nor avarice, nor impurity; none of our vices will ascend with our Healer. So if we desire to ascend in company with Him we must desist from sin and evil. We celebrate today the solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. By celebrating this feast devoutly, virtuously, faithfully, piously, we ascend with Him and have our hearts above. For the resurrection of the Lord is our hope, and His ascension is our glorification.”

If then you were raised with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ is, sitting at the right hand of God. —**Colossians 3:1**

Thou hast ascended in glory, O Christ our God, and gladdened Thy disciples with the promise of the Holy Spirit; and they were assured by the blessing that Thou art the Son of God and Redeemer of the world. —**Dismissal Hymn**

CHAPTER ELEVEN

***THE HOSPITALITY OF ABRAHAM (AN ICON OF THE TRINITY)
SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE***

The Hospitality of Abraham (An Icon of the Trinity)



The Trinity has been enshrined in a magnificent icon painted by Andrei Rublev in the early fifteenth century. Rublev was a monk at the monastery of the Holy Trinity, just north of Moscow. It is now exhibited in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. Often called the “Old Testament Trinity,” it is considered by many to be the greatest Christian icon ever written.

The icon is based on the incident recorded in *Genesis 18:1-15*, where the Lord appeared to Abraham by the oak of Mamre. Abraham sees three men and offers them hospitality. The early fathers of the Church saw this incident as a foreshadowing of the later revelation of the Holy Trinity at the baptism of Jesus. By the late fourth century, the theme of the hospitality of Abraham was viewed as a prefiguration of the Trinity, one God in three persons. It soon became a common theme in Eastern Christian iconography.

It is this icon that is used to commemorate Trinity Sunday (also called Pentecost) in the Orthodox Church. The icon of the Descent of the Holy Spirit is venerated on the Monday after Pentecost. Thus, the Orthodox Church has two icons for Pentecost: the Rublev icon for Pentecost Sunday and the Icon of the Descent of the Holy Spirit for the Monday after Pentecost.

It is interesting that Abraham speaks to the angels in Genesis 18 sometimes in the singular and sometimes in the plural, hinting at the unity of the Trinity as he speaks sometimes to the one God and sometimes to the three persons of the Trinity. One Orthodox liturgical commentary says, very clearly, “Blessed Abraham, thou hast seen and received the One and Triune Godhead.”

The rich symbolism of the icon of the Trinity has been magnificently explained in a French catechism on the Orthodox faith, now translated into English and published by St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, entitled *The Living God: A Catechism of the Christian Faith*:

Silence is evoked before this icon, just as before the mystery of the Trinity. We should, therefore, attempt to approach it through prayer, a profession of faith, an act of adoration.

Let us take the text of the Creed and place it beside a reproduction of the icon. One is struck at once by the fact that the composition of the painting

echoes the profession of faith: “I believe in one God.” Rublev expresses unity both through the similarity of the three angels and through the circular pattern in which the three are represented. Everything concerning the Father is stated very briefly in the Creed, for He is the One about whom we can know almost nothing. In the icon the first angel to the left is very pale, indefinable, almost transparent. (He represents the Father.)

The text of the Creed continues, like the icon, stopping longest at the figure of the Son. The second angel is facing us, manifesting Himself completely to us. We know a great deal about the Son, for He became incarnate, allowing Himself to be known and seen. His garment is of bright, clear colors, blue and brown. This symbolizes the two natures of Christ. The blue stands for heaven: divinity; the brown is for the earth: humanity. Jesus is simultaneously God and man. Behind the central angel stands a tree; its roots are planted in the earth, its branches stretch out toward heaven. It is the wood of the Cross, which through Christ becomes the tree of life in paradise.

When speaking of the Holy Spirit, the Creed again is brief and succinct. Few things can be said of the Third Person of the Divinity. It is He who gives us life, concretely and historically. Yet His action remains secret and mysterious. The third angel, like the first one, is seen from an angle. The color of His garment symbolizes the force of life. The dominant green stands for youth, the sap of life which allows all things to exist and grow.

The three angels form a circle which is not closed. It seems to open a spot where the chalice is standing on the table. The last part of the Creed deals with the Church: this is where we find the chalice of the Eucharist and where all men are united through baptism to take part in the feast of life eternal. And eternal life means to enter and reside in the heart of the Trinity. [\[lxviii\]](#)

AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

An important aspect of Rublev's icon of the Trinity is that it invites participation. John Chryssavgis writes that "There is an empty or open space at the table of Communion. The three persons of the Trinity are seated on three of the four sides of the rectangular table, allowing for, or rather inviting the world, to Communion. Indeed, the very contours of their bodies create and reproduce in macro-image the Communion chalice around which these angels are seated."^{[\[lxix\]](#)} This invitation to participate in the Trinity is described by St. Peter as the invitation to become "partakers of divine nature," i.e., theosis. Dr. Gennadios Limouris describes our participation in the Trinity when he writes:

God is love and the Godhead is a community of persons from all eternity, and we are called to be a communion of truth and love, a plurality of persons in perfect unity, united one with another and all with God through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.^{[\[lxx\]](#)}

AN EXTERNAL MOVEMENT OF LIFE AND LOVE

To express the undulating movement of love in the Trinity, the Church fathers came up with the word *perichoresis*. It can be described as the Dance of the Dancer, an eternal movement of life and love, swaying from person through person within the one Godhead. This unity of God in three persons means that each person includes the other. When we say “Father,” we see in Him the Son and the Holy Spirit; when we say Holy Spirit, we see in Him the Father and the Son. An indication of this is the words of Jesus, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” (John 14:9).

Thus, when we receive Christ in the Eucharist, we are receiving also the Father and the Holy Spirit. For example, in the pre-Communion Orthodox prayers, we pray that when we receive Christ in the Eucharist, “...I may have Thee, with the Father and the Holy Spirit dwelling and abiding in me.”

In John 14:23, we hear Jesus saying, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him and we will come to him and make our home with him.” We, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, will come and make our home in him or her.

Thus, when Jesus died and rose for us, He was inviting us to join Him in the undulating dance of love, the dance of the Trinity, centering everything in life on Him even as He gave His all for us. In this dance even the trees will sing and make music as mourning turns into dancing.

IS IT PROPER TO PORTRAY THE TRINITY ICONOGRAPHICALLY?

Archbishop Rowan Williams of Canterbury offers the answer to this important question in his excellent book, *The Dwelling of Light*:

The whole theology of icons depended upon the incarnation; God could be depicted only because God had taken and transformed ordinary flesh and blood. But the Father and the Holy Spirit had never taken flesh, and so could not be painted. Eastern religious art avoided until a very late and rather decadent stage the curious Western habit of showing God the Father as an old man and the Spirit as a dove. Did that mean that the Trinity itself could never be depicted? In a sense, yes, it did; there could be no way of showing the eternal life of God ‘in itself.’ But there was this narrative in which it seemed that the three divine agents appeared visibly in history; here was the vehicle for some kind of representation of the mystery. [\[lxxi\]](#)

Archbishop Rowan Williams emphasizes that the icon shows “three agents acting as one—not a sort of divine drama with different characters.... It is good to be reminded forcefully that all that God does is done by the whole Trinity equally, and that to talk of three persons must not mislead us into thinking of human patterns of relationships and cooperation.” [\[lxxii\]](#) As Jesus said, “May they all be one, as we are one” (John 17:21).

A magnificent summary of the meaning of this icon is offered in the book *Icons: Windows on Eternity* edited by Gennadios Limouris:

The figures of the Son and the Holy Spirit are turned towards the Father, who is the Source of their life and whom they call: “Abba!” or “Father” (Mark 14:36, Gal. 4:6). The Father exists to give life eternally to the Son and the Holy Spirit. The Son and the Holy Spirit exist from all eternity since the Father has given Himself to them throughout all eternity. The Son and the Holy Spirit are living because they give themselves in turn to the Father. Each Person lives only for the others. None can be thought of in isolation from the two others. Each lives the life of the others and gives Himself totally to the others in such a way that each of the persons of the Trinity is in the others (John 17:21)....

The Father gives the cup, the Son blesses it and sanctifies it by the gift of Himself, and then the Holy Spirit transmits it to the world, being the personal Spirit of the communion (2 Cor. 13:3). The Spirit, clothed in translucent green, transmits to the world the life given by God which is divine life. Hence the Spirit is the giver of life or life-giving (Rom. 8:2). [\[lxxiii\]](#)

THE TRINITY IN THE ORTHODOX CHURCH

Since Pentecost Sunday is dedicated to the Trinity on the Orthodox calendar, we shall now examine exactly what the Orthodox Church believes and teaches about this great doctrine.

God first revealed Himself as Trinity at the baptism of Jesus, which is also called Theophany, a word which means the manifestation of God in His fullness. It was at the baptism of Jesus that all three persons of the Holy Trinity appeared together for the first time. The Father's voice testified from on high to the divine sonship of Jesus. The Son accepted His Father's testimony, and the Holy Spirit was seen descending from the Father in the form of a dove and resting upon the Son.

So Jesus was baptized, and as He came straight up out of the water, suddenly heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God coming down like a dove and resting upon Him. And with that, a voice came from heaven, which said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16-17).

The threefold disclosure of God is also the subject of the troparion of the feast:

When Thou, O Lord, was baptized in the Jordan,
The worship of the Trinity was made manifest.
For the voice of the Father bore witness unto Thee,
Calling Thee the beloved Son,
And the Spirit in the form of a dove
Confirmed His word as sure and steadfast.
O Christ our God, Who hast appeared and enlightened the world,
Glory to Thee.

The manifestation of God to Abraham is seen as a foreshadowing of the revelation that will be completed on Pentecost.

TRINITY IN DAILY WORSHIP

God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—plays an important role in the life and worship of the Orthodox Christian. We make the sign of the cross with the thumb and first two fingers representing the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We bring these three fingers together to signify that we believe not in three Gods but in one. We are baptized in the name of the Trinity; we are forgiven in the name of the Trinity; we are married in the name of the Trinity; every liturgy begins with the name of the Trinity; we bless the name of the Trinity: “Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit;” we are blessed in the name of the Trinity: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all;” every Sunday we confess our faith in the Holy Trinity when we say in the Nicene Creed: “I believe in one God, the Father Almighty...and in one Lord Jesus Christ...and in the Holy Spirit.” All prayer in the Orthodox Church is addressed to the Triune God. We are not Unitarians. We pray *to* God the Father *through* our Lord Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit. As Trinity, God is a social being.

This does not mean that Orthodox Christians believe in three Gods—only one. How did the belief in a Trinitarian God originate?

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE EARLY CHRISTIANS

The Trinity is based primarily on the experience of the early Christians. When they met Christ, they met God. “My Lord and my God!” said Thomas. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,” said Peter. “He who sees me, sees the Father,” said Jesus. “I and the Father are one.” “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself,” said Paul. Then at Pentecost they experienced the overwhelming sense of the divine presence in their lives and they remembered that this was what the Spirit of God promised by the prophet Joel in the Old Testament.

The doctrine of the Trinity was not dropped from heaven by God. In fact, the word Trinity is never even mentioned in the Scriptures. It came from the way the early Christians experienced God. It was an experience before it ever became a doctrine. The doctrine was an intellectual expression of what the early Christians found to be compellingly real in their own lives.

Peter, for example, knew God in three ways. He knew God as “Father.” He knew God as “Son” in the person of Jesus Christ. On Pentecost he experienced God as “Holy Spirit,” as a presence and power within his own heart and within the Church.

How clearly we see the Trinity in God’s plan of salvation. “God (the Father) so loved the world that He gave His only Son (Jesus) that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have life everlasting” (John 3:16). Then on Pentecost God sent the Holy Spirit to abide with us forever. The Holy Spirit is as necessary for salvation as is Jesus. It was the Holy Spirit who originally brought Jesus to us. “Joseph, Son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:20). It is the same Holy Spirit who continues to bring Jesus to us today. In every liturgy we kneel as the priest prays the EPICLESIS, praying that the Holy Spirit may come first upon us and then upon our gifts of bread and wine to transform them and us: the bread and the wine into the precious body and blood of Jesus and all of us into the body of Christ.

When Paul speaks of the “Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the communion of the Holy Spirit,” these were energies of the

Trinity which he had received and experienced personally.

HOLY TRINITY IS GOD EXPERIENCED THROUGH HIS ENERGIES

We must realize that one of the greatest differences between the Western Church and the Eastern lies in the fact that the Western Church believes that God can be known through the rational, through reason. The Eastern Church believes that God can be known through reason, but only up to a point. Beyond that He may be known through His energies.

According to Eastern Christian theology, God's essence cannot be known; it is beyond reason, but it can be experienced empirically through God's energies, i.e., through the many ways by which God has reached out to us and continues to reveal Himself to us, i.e., the Scriptures, the Incarnation, the Cross, through His many miracles, *etc.* One of the greatest theological works of the Western Church is Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* which expounds how God can be known only through reason.

The Western Church believes only in the essence of God. It denies the energies of God. The East objected to this through one of its great saints, Gregory Palamas, who taught that the essence of God is apophatic (cannot be known) but can be made known to us through experience (through the energies of God). This is true in the case of the Trinity which we believe not because of reason but because we have experienced God as Trinity. How? Through energies of God, i.e., the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ ("And of His Fullness have we received grace for grace" John 1:16). We have experienced the Trinity through the love of God the Father: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son..." (John 3:16). And we have experienced the power of God through the Holy Spirit: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you" (Acts 1:8).

God as Trinity is an example of how we can know God through His energies, i.e., through the ways He has reached out to us: through the grace of our Lord Jesus, through the love of God the Father and through the koinonia and power of the Holy Spirit—all of which constitute energies of God.

“I WANT A SIMPLE GOD”

There are people who will say, “The Trinity...that’s a little too complicated for me. I want a simple God, a God I can understand.” Well, we shall never be able to understand God completely. This is the reason we cannot understand the Trinity. This is not to say, however, that we cannot express the Trinity in a way that is understandable. The Trinity means that I believe in God the Father who made me, God the Son who saves me, and God the Holy Spirit who lives in me. God the Father: *for* us in love eternally! God the Son: *with* us in grace, historically, but also eternally! God the Holy Spirit: *in* us in power, experientially, historically, and eternally! God the Father: God *above* me. God the Son: God *beside* me. God the Holy Spirit: God *within* me and within the Church. The doctrine of the Trinity, then, in summing up the entire New Testament experience of God, also sums up the whole Christian gospel. It expresses the apex of Orthodox theology: that God is not a Monad, but is a social being: one in three. That is exactly why God is love.

THE TRINITY IN SCRIPTURE

The doctrine of the Trinity, which is based on man's experience of God in the New Testament, is anchored in Scripture. The Lord Jesus said in His great commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matt. 28:19). The three persons are mentioned specifically in the great commission, yet the unity of the three is expressed in the use of the word "in the name" not in the "names." It uses the singular, not the plural. No one can be a Christian without being baptized, said Jesus. And no one can be baptized except in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, which is to say that no one can be a Christian unless one believes and is baptized in the name of the Trinity. This is the great gateway, the only entrance to Christianity.

We saw previously that the Trinity was present at the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River. Jesus stood there as the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in the form of a dove and the voice of the Father was heard saying, "This is my beloved Son." The three persons of the Trinity appeared together.

Thus, St. Paul speaks of "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" in 2 Corinthians 13:14.

St. Peter mentions the Trinity in his first letter: "Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ...chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ..." (1 Peter 1:1-2).

There are also glimpses of the Trinity in the Old Testament. When God is about to create man, He says, "Let us make man in our image and likeness" (Genesis 1:26). In the next verse we read, "And God made man in his image and likeness." The plural words, "us" and "our," seem to suggest several persons. The singular word "his," however, suggests that the several persons were somehow mysteriously one.

A MYSTERY

Our belief in the Trinity, firmly anchored as it is in Scripture, remains a mystery. It reveals the fullness of God to us and yet at the same time it hides Him from us. For no one can really understand how God can be three distinct persons yet one God.

When we say that the Trinity is a mystery, we should define what we mean by mystery. An excellent definition of mystery is found in the book, *What Is Faith*, by Eugene Joly:

A mystery is not a wall against which you run your head, but an ocean into which you plunge. A mystery is not night; it is the sun, so brilliant that we cannot gaze at it, but so luminous that everything is illuminated by it.

This is what the mystery of the Trinity is to us, like “the sun, so brilliant that we cannot gaze at it; but so luminous that everything is illuminated by it.”

St. Philaret of Moscow described the Trinity this way: “The Father is crucifying Love, the Son is Love crucified, the Holy Spirit is the invincible power of the cross.”

THE TRINITY SHOWS HOW ACCESSIBLE GOD IS

The Trinity shows not only how mysterious God is but also how *accessible*. God becomes one with us in Christ (the Incarnation). He becomes our brother, sharing our sorrows, our weaknesses, our temptations, our suffering, and our death. The ancient pagan gods dwelt high on Mt. Olympus—inaccessible but also completely indifferent to us. Jesus, on the other hand, comes to stand beside us as Emmanuel: God with us. How near, how approachable, how available, how inescapable, every day, everywhere, with ordinary people in this ordinary world—this is the God who became man in Jesus; the God who at Pentecost came in the Holy Spirit to abide within each of us, filling us with the presence and power of God. God above us. God beside us. God within us. This is what the doctrine of the Trinity tells us. Without the Trinity God would be unknowable as well as inaccessible.

THREE PERSONS

When the early fathers said that there were three “*Persons*” in the Godhead, they did not use the term “person” in exactly the same way we use it when speaking of people. They used it only for the lack of another word to express what they meant. Augustine wrote, “They are certainly three, but if we ask ‘three what?,’ human speech is overcome by its great poverty. Then we say, ‘three persons,’ not to express the reality, but to save ourselves from silence” (De Trinitate VII, 8). The Church fathers used the word “person” not to limit God to our level; they used it because personality was the highest life they knew, and God could not be less than that. He had to be more—far more! Jesus expressed this often with His words: “How much more.” “If you who are evil know how to give good things to your children, *how much more* will your Father in heaven give good things to those who ask Him.”

The word “person” was chosen to help us understand that each person of the Trinity is someone to whom we can speak, of whom we can make a request, whom we can love, and with whom we can have a personal relationship. The Trinity, then, is like the brilliant sun, impossible to gaze into, yet illuminating our knowledge of God as one who is approachable and accessible in Christ and through the Holy Spirit.

GOD IN HIS FULLNESS

The doctrine of the Trinity preserves God in His fullness. To the Orthodox Christian, the word “God” by itself is too vague. The Trinity amplifies and describes God more fully. To us, “God” means the Father who loves us, the Son who saves us, and the Holy Spirit who abides within us. God the Creator, God the Redeemer, God the Sanctifier. Anything less than this would not be the God of the New Testament. The only way we Orthodox Christians can express everything we mean by that overwhelming word “God” is to say “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” We cannot in any way speak adequately about God without speaking of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in the same breath. The doctrine of the Trinity, then, preserves God in His fullness.

Bishop Theophan the Recluse has said, “We are saved by the good will of the Father through the merits of the Son by the grace of the Holy Spirit.”

DO WE NEED THE HOLY TRINITY?

We need the Holy Trinity. Who is it who does not need the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ? “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,” writes St. Paul, “That, though He was rich, yet for your sake, He became poor, so that by His poverty, you might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Who is it who does not need the love of God the Father? “God so loved the world that he gave His only Son that whoever believes in Him might not perish but have life everlasting” (John 3:16). Who is it who does not need the power of the Holy Spirit? “You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Acts 1:8). Yours can be the grace of Christ, yours the love of God the Father, yours the power of the Holy Spirit.

This is the meaning of the Trinity which sums up the whole gospel, presenting us with the fullness of God’s presence, power, and love. God above me. God beside me. God inside me. The French author, Francois Mauriac, said once that no one who is created by the Father, redeemed by the Son, and indwelt by the Holy Spirit can ever count oneself unimportant. This is why the Church never tires of singing in gratitude: “Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, now and ever and unto ages of ages. Amen.”

St. Irenaeus pictures the Trinity as God the Father stretching His two arms out to us in love; one arm is Jesus and the other arm is the Holy Spirit. When we move toward those arms, they wrap us in an embrace as the prodigal son was embraced by his father in a celebration of great love and joy.

PRAYER

My hope is the Father,
My refuge is the Son,
My protection is the Holy Spirit,
Blessed Trinity,
Glory to Thee. —An Orthodox Prayer

MORE ON THE ICON

Rublev's icon of the Trinity expresses aspects of the nature of God in a manner that goes beyond words. The three angelic guests around the altar act in perfect unity and speak in one voice, expressing the oneness of three persons in one God.

The icon is rendered in bright, translucent colors, since it attempts to represent a heavenly reality. The angels look very much alike, to indicate that the three persons of God are one in essence. Abraham and Sarah are included in early versions of the icon (as they should be) since the intent of the icon is to show that God desires to speak to humanity.

Dr. Gennadios Limouris comments on the colors:

Through lines and colours, the icon of the Trinity conveys the glory of the living God who revealed Himself by the oaks of Mamre. The blue symbolizes the divinity of all Three. The gold of their halos symbolizes their holiness; the royal scepters, the Lordship of all Three. At the same time, each Person is differentiated by attitude or by relationship to the two others and by the colours assigned to each. [\[lxxiv\]](#)

Jim Forest writes,

Each head is submissively inclined toward one of the others. No one of the three assumes an imperial attitude. There is an atmosphere of love, freedom, timelessness, rest and intimate communion. The sense of oneness is achieved primarily through the gentle engagement of the three with each other, the joining of eyes. [\[lxxv\]](#)

Centered on the cup of crucified love, the faces of the three express infinite tenderness, compassion, and love. The structure of the icon is significant since the backs of the three figures form a circle—a symbol of perfection and eternity.

The three figures on the icon are pictured in the order of the Nicene Creed from left to right: "I believe in God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

The figure on the left toward whom the other two incline, represents God the Father. The figure in the center represents God the Son. His figure stands out because He came closest to us through the incarnation. The figure on the right in shades of green (symbol of life) represents God the Holy Spirit. As noted there is no separation or confusion or subordination in the three figures.

THE HOUSE

The house shown in older versions of the icon is depicted as having no door, representing the Church, which is open to all. John Baggley identifies it as the house of Abraham and Sarah which ultimately becomes the Church, the heavenly kingdom, the Father's house to which we now have access.

THE OAK OF MAMRE

The oak of Mamre is the tree pictured in the icon. It was located near the city of Hebron. It represents the Tree of Life planted by God in Paradise, beneath whose branches Adam and Eve fell. According to tradition, it was from this tree that the cross was made.

THE MOUNTAIN

The mountain in the icon represents both Mount Sinai and Mount Tabor, places where God's glory was made visible to human eyes.

THE ALTAR

Between the three figures is an altar on which there is a chalice containing in miniature a lamb's body, symbolizing the sacrificial death of Christ, the Lamb of God. The Son's hand is shown in a gesture of blessing. It shows how Christians now enter into communion with the Trinity when they participate in the Eucharist. The calf in the chalice recalls the calf killed by Abraham for his visitors. It foretells typologically the sacrifice of Jesus, the Lamb of God. Origen referred to the calf in the chalice as "The Fatted Calf" which the father slaughtered to welcome His repentant son. "For He so loved the world, as to give His only Son for the life of the world."

THE ICON REFLECTS THE LOVE OF GOD

The icon radiates love since the three figures in the icon are united in an indescribable bond of love, since “God is love” (1 John 4:16). And He is love precisely because He is triune. Meditating on this icon immerses one in a feeling of supreme peace and love.

Dr. Paul Evdokimov, the noted French Orthodox theologian, said of the Rublev icon of the Trinity, “One can say without fear of contradiction that nowhere in the world is there anything like this icon from the point of view of theological synthesis, symbolic richness and artistic beauty.”

It must be stated that earlier versions of this icon showed guests seated side by side at a long table while Abraham and Sarah waited on them. While working on a new version of this icon in 1425 for the iconostasis of the Holy Trinity Monastery north of Moscow, St. Andrei Rublev compressed the icon to a smaller version, consisting of an altar, a chalice, the three angels, plus three objects behind them: a house, a tree, and a mountain. Jim Forest writes, “Rublev shifted the icon’s emphasis from a particular biblical event to a meditation on the dialogue of love within the Holy Trinity.”^{[[lxxvi](#)]}

Rublev’s mentor was the famous iconographer Theophanes the Greek, who came to Russia as an immigrant from Constantinople and worked in Novgorod (1378) decorating the Cathedral of the Transfiguration.

Fr. Paul Florensky, a famous Russian scientist and priest, who died a martyr’s death in the Stalin era, once said of this icon, “Rublev’s Holy Trinity icon exists, therefore God exists.”

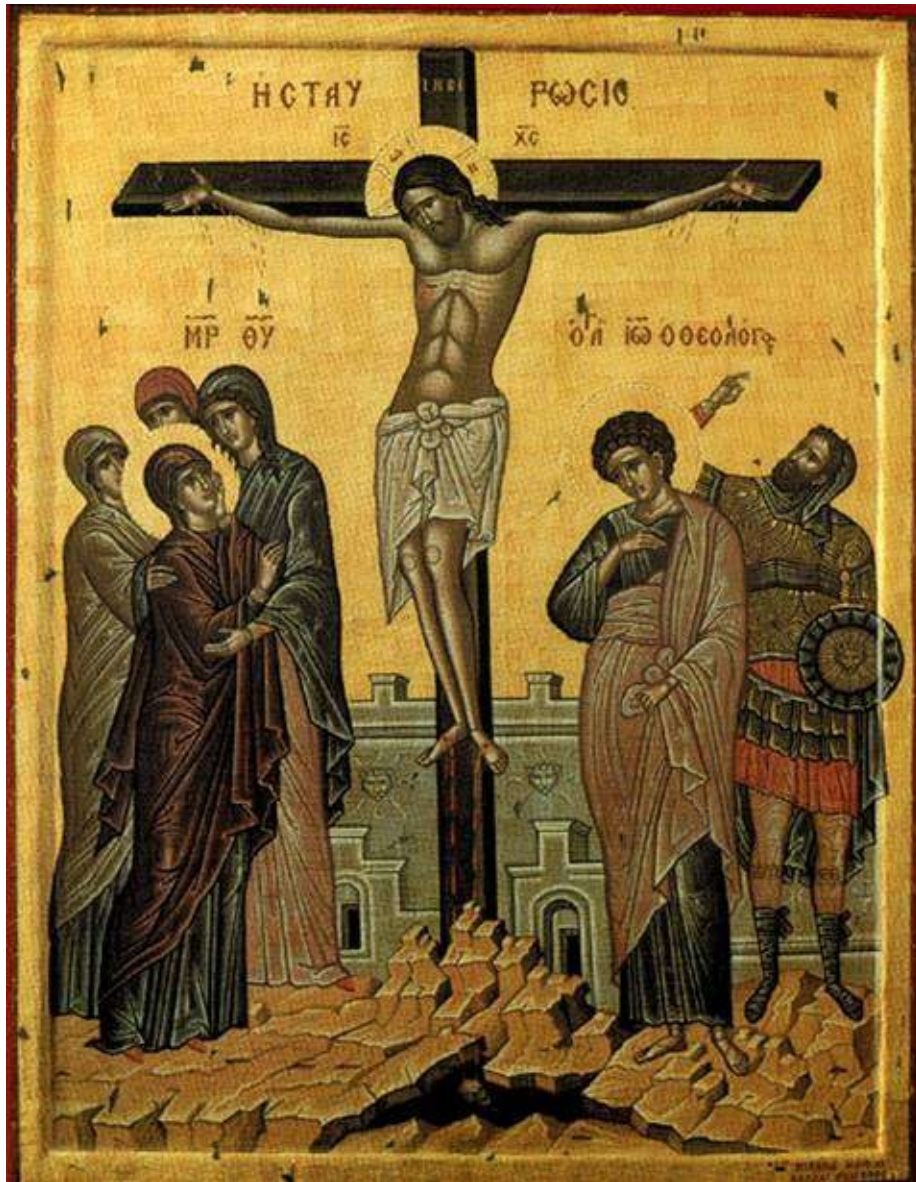
I am loved by God the Father Who created me in His own image and destined me for eternal union with Him. I am loved and redeemed by God the Son, my precious Jesus, Who loved me and gave Himself for me. I am loved and indwelt by God the Holy Spirit, God’s power and presence Within me. Blessed Trinity, glory to Thee.

CHAPTER TWELVE

THE ICON OF THE CRUCIFIXION SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

The heretics say that because Christ died nailed to the Cross, they cannot bear to see the form of the wood on which He was put to death.... But where did Christ despoil and drive completely away the principalities and powers of the evil spirits? Where did he triumph over them and put them to shame so that we could be set free? Where was the middle wall of partition broken down and our enmity toward God abolished and put to death? Surely it was on the Cross and by means of the Cross. —St. Gregory Palamas

The Crucifixion



As we study world religions, we come to see that it was common for man to offer sacrifices to gods, but it was something entirely new that God should sacrifice Himself for man. Yet this is what the crucifixion is all about. God in the person of Jesus dies on the cross for us.

The crucifixion of Jesus is not only a fact; it is also a window enabling us to see a great truth. There have been other events in history that have served as windows. Galileo took a long look at a swinging chandelier in a cathedral and saw behind it the truth about the movement of the earth. Newton looked at an apple falling from a tree and saw behind it the truth about gravitation.

The cross is such a window through which we see the great truth of God's love for us. "God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in Him may not perish but have life everlasting" (John 3:16).

God is no longer silent. He has spoken clearly and distinctly. This happened above all on the cross.

"God commendeth His own love towards us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

"Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us, and sent His Son to be the propitiation of our sins" (1 John 4:10).

"Surely He hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows; yet we did esteem Him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with His stripes we are healed" (Isaiah 53:4-5).

"The Son of man is come not to be ministered unto; but to minister, and to give His life as ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

"You know that you were redeemed not with corruptible things as silver and gold but with the precious blood of Christ as of a Lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19).

"In Him we have redemption through His blood, even the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7).

A priest visiting a dying man, who was beyond hearing the help words could give, held the crucifix before the dying man's eyes and said, "This is how much God loves you!" When Christ died on the cross He was saying to us, "Nothing that you can ever do to me will ever stop me from loving you. You may disobey me; you may batter me and bruise me and scourge me; you may kill me on a cross, but I will never stop loving you. This is how much I love you."

All that happened on Golgotha enables us to look into the loving, suffering, redeeming heart of God. Man had been offering sacrifices to gods for centuries. On Calvary we see the one, true God sacrificing Himself for us! "Nothing can equal the miracle of my salvation: a few drops of blood recreate the entire world" (St. Gregory Nazianzus).

"For this purpose I have come to this hour," prayed Jesus in Gethsemane as He knelt in prayer, sweating drops of blood for us.

TWO VAST LINES

Look at the Cross and remember what David says in Psalm 103:11-12, “For as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is his steadfast love toward those who fear him; as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.”

If we act out these two verses, we have two vast lines, one reaching from heaven to earth: “as the heavens are high above the earth, so great is His steadfast love toward those who fear him.” This is the vertical line of God’s steadfast love. The other line stretches from east to west: “as far as the east is from the west, so far does He remove our transgressions from us.” This is the horizontal line of God’s forgiveness.

Where these two vast lines of forgiveness and love meet, they form a cross which casts a shadow on each one of us: the shadow of God’s forgiving love.

A “STUMBLING BLOCK AND FOOLISHNESS”

It is hard to believe that the cross would one day become a cherished piece of decorative jewelry since to the disciples it was a horrible instrument of death. It was in the words of St. Paul “a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles” (1 Cor. 1:23).

Only once in history was man asked what he would do with God. The answer given was, “Crucify Him.”

The crucifixion of Jesus was a terrible crime because it was done to an innocent man. But its significance becomes absolutely horrendous when we realize that it was done to God. And God allowed Himself to be crucified in order to redeem us.

NOT AN ORDINARY WAY OF EXECUTION

Crucifixion was not just an ordinary way of carrying out a death sentence. It was a death sentence reserved only for the lowest class of people, the slaves. If a Roman citizen had committed a crime requiring the death sentence, he would be executed by hanging or some other means—never by crucifixion. It was that kind of death, the most dreaded in the ancient world, a death fit only for slaves, that Jesus died.

Crucifixion had originated in Persia. Its origin came from the fact that the earth was considered to be sacred to the god Ormuzd. Thus, the criminal was lifted up from it that he might not defile the earth, which was God's property. From Persia, crucifixion spread to Carthage in North Africa and from there to Rome. Taking all our sins upon Himself, the Son of God was considered such a terrible criminal that He was lifted up from the earth on a cross so as not to defile His own earth! It was that kind of humiliating death that Jesus—the second person of the Holy Trinity—suffered for us.

The Crucifixion is described very simply in the Gospels: "When they came to the place that is called the Skull, there they crucified Him" (Luke 23:33). There is no attempt to describe the utter horror of crucifixion. To do so was needless; everyone at that time was acquainted with the ghastly details of such a death. But we today are not. We need to be reminded not only of the agony but also the humiliation Jesus suffered for us.

THE NEW TREE OF LIFE

The Crucifixion icon shows Christ, the new Adam, unclothed, hanging on a tree of shame, the cross, which has now become the new tree of life for redeemed humanity (Gal. 3:13-14). The sin of the first Adam deprived man of access to the tree of life in Paradise, but the cross of Christ—the second tree—has opened the gates to Paradise.

A great teacher of Orthodoxy, St. Theodore the Studite, interpreted the victorious nature of Christ's death on the cross, for all generations when he wrote,

How precious is the gift of the cross! See, how beautiful it is to behold!....It is a tree which brings forth life, not death. It is the source of light, not darkness. It offers you a home in Eden. It does not cast you out. It is the tree which Christ mounted as a king on his chariot, and so destroyed the devil, the lord of death, and rescued the human race from slavery to the tyrant. It is the tree on which the Lord, like a great warrior with His hands and feet and His divine side pierced in battle, healed the wounds of our sins, healed our nature that had been wounded by the evil serpent. Of old we were poisoned by a tree; now we have found immortality through a tree....

....By the cross, death was killed and Adam restored to life. In the cross every apostle has gloried; by it every martyr has been crowned and every saint made holy. We have put on the cross of Christ, and laid aside the old man. Through the cross we have joined Christ's flock, and are granted a place in the sheepfold of heaven.

All this leads Vladimir Lossky to write the following encomium to the cross of Christ:

The Cross is then the concrete expression of the Christian mystery, of victory by defeat, of glory by humiliation, of life by death—symbol of an omnipotent God, Who willed to become man and to die as a slave, in order to save His creature. The cross is the insignia of Christ's royalty—"I call Him King because I see Him crucified: It belongs to the King to die for His subjects" (St. John Chrysostom)—the Cross is also the very image of the Redemption, which is the

economy of the love of the Trinity towards fallen humanity: “Crucifying Love of the Father, crucified Love of the Son, Love of the Holy Spirit triumphant by the wood of the Cross” (Philaret of Moscow).^{[\[lxxvii\]](#)}

A WRATHFUL GOD?

A priest tells of an elderly man who stopped him on the street one day and said to him, “I want to tell you something, Father. I would go to church, but I can’t. I could never worship a God who tortured and killed His son. It’s as simple as that. If He was really God, He could have found some other way to fix whatever was wrong with the world. I couldn’t respect a man who did that to His son, no matter what the reason, and I won’t worship a God who did it. I just wanted you to know that.”

This story derives from the false theology of Anselm of Canterbury which was accepted by many in the West. It suggests that God vented His wrath for man’s sin by inflicting a terrible punishment on His perfectly innocent Son, which as the elderly man protested to the priest was outrageously unjust.

God’s wrath had nothing to do with the crucifixion of Jesus. It was an act born of pure love. For “God is love.” The story of God’s wrath is born of bad theology. God is not just God the Father. The fullness of God is trinitarian: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The entire plan of man’s salvation from beginning to end is the result of the fullness of God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—working together in unison and complete harmony to save us from sin and death.

As the Father commands, the Son freely goes forth in the power of the Holy Spirit to become one of us (Incarnation). Atonement means that at the command of the Father and in the power of the Spirit, the Son willingly accomplished the perfect deed of love on the cross at Golgotha. The cross was born utterly of grace, driven by no necessity other than love. It was not an angry Father demanding justice and the loving Son then satisfying the demand by dying on the cross. From God’s side it was love all the way; the failure was all on our side. The reason for the cross is not the wrath of God the Father, but the love of the triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together as one for our salvation; not out of wrath but out of love.

The wonder of it all is that through the Eucharist God perpetuates Christ’s sacrifice. He offers Himself on the cross in every liturgy, not to redeem some legal guilt or appease the wrath of an oppressive Father who demands that His justice be satisfied, but out of love. Thus, as Christos Yannaras says, “The

Eucharist is the whole of our salvation, the whole Truth and realization of the Christian Gospel.” [\[lxxviii\]](#)

St. Gregory Nazianzus has the perfect answer for those who accept Anselm’s theory that the Father’s justice needed to be satisfied by the sacrifice of His Son: “Why then should the blood of His only begotten Son please the Father, who would not even receive Isaac when he was offered as a burnt offering by Abraham, but replaced the human sacrifice with a ram?” (St. Gregory Nazianzus).

“VOLUNTARY” PASSION AND SCRIPTURAL READINGS

The liturgical texts and Scriptural readings of Holy Week repeatedly refer to Christ’s passion as “voluntary”. “As the Lord went to His *voluntary* passion....” Just as the incarnation of the Word of God took place by the will of the Son, and with the good will of the Father and the cooperation of the Holy Spirit, the same is true of Christ’s passion. It was entirely voluntary. It was totally trinitarian. Wrath had nothing to do with it. Love—the love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—had everything to do with it.

Jesus’ prayer in Gethsemane is most revealing, “O my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.” The prayer reveals the two natures in Christ as well as His two natural wills, which do not conflict. Why? Because the human will always obeyed the divine will. This shows that the Passion was entirely voluntary on the part of Christ.

THE PLACE OF THE SKULL

According to the fathers of the Church, Jesus was crucified on the spot where Adam was buried. Thus, when blood and water flowed from Christ's holy side, the relics of Adam immediately below the cross were cleansed. That is why most icons show a skull at the base of the cross in a dark cave with the blood and water from the body of Jesus dripping on them. The rock of Golgotha was rent by an earthquake at the moment of Christ's death. That is why to this day one sees a split in the rock of Golgotha on which the Cross was anchored. This holy site is available today for veneration in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Lossky says of this event, "It served to bring out the dogmatic meaning of the icon of the Crucifixion; the redemption of the first Adam by the blood of Christ, the New Adam, who made Himself man to save the human race."^[lxxix] In fact, the word Golgotha means "the place of the skull." Thus the blood of Christ dripping on the skull of Adam expresses visually the fact that Christ died for the redemption of all humanity, beginning with Adam.

Metropolitan Hierotheos writes of the blood and water that flowed from Christ's side, which are visible on most icons of the crucifixion:

The Church is the glorious Body of Christ and not some religious organization. In the Church there are these two sacraments which are signified by blood and water, that is to say, Baptism and the Divine Eucharist. Man's nature is purified, the image is washed, by Holy Baptism and by Holy Communion he attains life. In this light the Cross is life and resurrection.^[lxxx]

Metropolitan Hierotheos echoes St. John Chrysostom who said,

These springs of blood and water did not gush forth simply by chance, but because the Church was formed out of them both: the initiated are reborn through water, and nourished on blood and flesh. It is here that we find the origin of the sacraments.

OUTSTRETCHED ARMS

Because the cross is life and resurrection, St. Athanasius said seventeen centuries ago, “It is only on a cross that a man dies with outstretched

hands.” What a magnificent symbolism hides behind those outstretched hands. On the Cross, God Himself, in the person of Christ, is stretching His hands, appealing to us to repent and return to Him, offering to bless us with the forgiveness of our sins, and calling us into the service of His kingdom.

Meditating on the outstretched hands of Christ, a monk of the Eastern Church wrote, “Your feet are nailed to the wood.... You have no possibility of escape. You are waiting for me at the rendezvous which You have assigned to me. Fastened to the Cross, You compel yourself to this waiting. It is possible for me not to come, but You are there and You remain there where You have allowed Yourself to be placed. Your arms are stretched out. They are opened as an appeal to all. They cannot be closed again. The nails keep them there in this gesture which is at one and the same time an invitation and an embrace. In silence, they beckon to me: ‘Come.’”^[lxxxi]

“Crucified, suffered, buried”—all for us. “All that I have done for you,” says Jesus, “What will you now do for me?” How can we ever repay such suffering, such love? “He who is conscious of a debt he can never pay will be forever paying it,” said G.K. Chesterton. God’s sacrifice on the Cross is that kind of a debt: one that we can never pay and yet will be forever paying as did St. Paul when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

“...FOR US”

The Creed states that Jesus was crucified FOR US. That means for you and me personally! So great and so personal is His love! He has borne my grief and carried my sorrows. He was wounded for my transgressions, He was bruised for my iniquities; the chastisement of my peace was upon Him, and with His stripes I am healed. For my sake He hangs on the Cross. For my sins. For my forgiveness.

“Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour!’ But for this purpose I have come to this hour” (John 12:27).

Dr. Blaise Pascal has been called the greatest mind that ever lived. In his book, *A Short History of the Life of Jesus Christ*, he wrote, “At midnight 23 November 1654, Jesus spoke to me and said, ‘Blaise, I was thinking of thee in my agony.’” This experience caused Pascal to be converted. It made the crucifixion personal. “Blaise,” said the voice of Christ, “it was for you I did all this.” Jesus suffered, died, was buried, and rose again not only for humanity in general but also for each one of us personally.

St. Tikhon, the great Russian saint, captured this thought when he wrote, “You (Lord) were sold and betrayed that we might be freed, we who were enslaved. You submitted to an unjust trial—You who are the judge of all the earth—that we might be freed from eternal punishment. You were crowned with thorns that we might receive the crown of life.... You were laid in a tomb that we might rise from the tomb.... This You have done for us, your undeserving servants, O Lord!”

A SALVATION THAT IS INEFFABLE AND INCOMPREHENSIBLE

One of the hymns of Sunday matins extols the crucifixion with these words:

We the faithful, speaking on things that pertain to God, touch upon an ineffable mystery, the Crucifixion that mind cannot comprehend, and the Resurrection that is beyond description: for today death and hell are destroyed, while mankind is clothed in incorruption (Sunday Matins, Tone 3).

The ineffable and incomprehensible mystery of the Crucifixion is extolled in the writings of the holy Apostles with words such as:

- “Christ saved us”;
- Christ “has covered our sins”;
- “He has torn up the handwriting against us and nailed it to the cross”;
- “We have been sanctified by His blood”;
- Christ is a “propitiation for our sins”;
- He “was made a curse for us”;
- “Christ has justified us”;
- “You are bought with a price”;
- “You are redeemed from the curse of the law”;
- By Him we have been “reconciled to God”;
- We have peace with God “by the death of His Son”; *etc.*

OUR PART IN ALL OF THIS

All of this God has accomplished for us through His Crucifixion and Resurrection. He has redeemed the whole of mankind and offers salvation as a gift to each one of us. His part is finished. "Tetelestai."

But it does not end there. The gift must be accepted before it can be ours. This one great truth of salvation for all offered to us by the Cross requires that we in turn do our part, that is, accept the gift personally.

St. Paul expresses this dual aspect of salvation clearly in two verses. First, he says, "You are saved through faith, and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8).

This is what God has already accomplished for us. Salvation is His gift to us. But St. Paul goes on to explain that we also have a part in all of this, "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12).

Part of this "working out" of our salvation involves asceticism. It means that we must cleanse ourselves since "nothing unclean can enter the kingdom of God" (Eph. 5:5, Rev. 21:27). God is Light, and there is no darkness in Him. Therefore, we must cast off the works of darkness and become children of light. God's energy (the Cross) must be followed by our synergy. As St. Paul writes, "Therefore let us cast off the work of darkness and let us put on the armour of light" (Rom. 13:12).

Through His Crucifixion Christ has opened the door to salvation. "I am the door," He says, "If anyone enters by me, he will be saved. He will go in and out and find pasture" (John 10:9). Therefore to enter the door to salvation requires daily repentance, purity of soul, a garment of holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord (Heb. 12:1).

The first part of our salvation was accomplished entirely by Christ through His Crucifixion and Resurrection. He has indeed opened the door to salvation for us. The second part of salvation depends on us. We must personally accept the gift, enter the door, leaving behind the works of darkness and taking up our cross to follow Him.

All of this is accomplished in us, of course, by the grace of Christ in the Holy Spirit. This is the meaning of the verse, “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling” (Phil. 2:12). God’s energy must be followed by our synergy. St. Paul adds in the next verse, “For it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (Phil. 2:13).

SALVATION IN CHRIST IS NOT MERELY A PERSONAL MATTER

Of course, personal holiness has its social dimensions. St. John Chrysostom greatly condemned every expression of individual salvation such as we hear from our evangelical brethren when they ask us, “Are you saved?”

Chrysostom proclaimed, “Seeking only one’s own salvation is the surest way to being lost...our life is a hard struggle; our King orders us to stand in the ranks without following our own interests.” The great Russian thinker, Soloviev, expressed it this way, “The one who will be saved is the one who saves others.”

Scott Cairns enjoys telling the story of an evangelical who visited Mount Athos in order to evangelize the monks. When asked if Jesus was “his personal Savior,” a wise and kind monk quickly replied with a smile, “No! I like to share Him.” Although salvation happens to persons, it is not merely a personal matter. It involves others and our outreach to them. “The one who will be saved is the one who saves others.”

IS GOD FAIR?

We ask this question as we contemplate Christ suffering on the Cross for our sins. We are the ones who should have been on the cross. It was our judgment, our sentence, our penalty, our condemnation; yet He bore it for us. Why? To show us that God loves us with a love so great that we shall never be able to comprehend it in its fullness. Justice says, “Every sin must be paid for.”

The Cross says, “It is God Himself who pays; God Himself has paid the price one for all, and it was the most costly price that could be paid—His own death, in Jesus Christ, on the Cross.”

St. Tikhon expressed this truth superbly when he wrote:

Our Lord and Creator suffered, endured His Passion, and died alone for us. We who broke the law; we the traitors; we who utter insults and blasphemies; we who have given ourselves up to the enemy; we deserve to be spat upon; we deserve to be mocked, insulted, buffeted, beaten, tortured, to die for all eternity. But our Lord and God out of infinite love died in our place.

The servant sinned; the Lord suffered the punishment.

The servant erred; the Lord was scourged.

The servant stole; the Lord offered compensation.

The servant was indebted; the Lord paid the debt.

And in what manner did He pay it? Not in gold and silver but with His disgrace, His wounds, His blood, His death on the cross.

Is this fair? Is it just that God should suffer for man? St. Isaac of Syria answered this question long ago when he wrote, “Do not presume to call God just: For what sort of justice is this—we sinned and He gave up His only begotten Son on the Cross?” It is not so much God’s justice as His love that speaks from the Cross.

WHY DID HE HAVE TO DIE FOR US?

Why did Jesus have to suffer and die for us? In the Garden of Gethsemane He even asked if there was some other way. There was not. There is not. On the Cross He even asked the question, “Why?” Why was He being forsaken? The answer the Bible gives is—for us! “God so loved the world...” (John 3:16).

All of this reminds me of an incident that happened recently. A Protestant denomination held a theological conference in which one speaker said, “I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all; I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff. Why can’t we just concentrate on teaching about how God is a God of love?” The answer is that if you take away the Cross, you don’t *have* a God of love.

“I am the Good Shepherd,” said Jesus. “The Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep.” The Good Shepherd gave His life for you and me on the Cross.

WHO CRUCIFIED CHRIST?

When faced with this question, we recoil in horror. We are ready to blame anybody other than ourselves. To wash our hands of the blood of this innocent man, we have committed a great crime against a whole race of people. We blamed the Jews for killing Jesus. We have blamed all of them for this horrendous crime. We persecuted them for centuries as Christ-killers. We murdered millions of them in pogroms. But this was not only a great crime but also a great lie. It was not the entire Jewish people, not even the Jews as such, but a small group of legalistic and religious fanatics, the Pharisees and the Sadducees, who opposed Jesus and finally condemned Him. The twelve apostles were Jews; so was St. Paul; so was Jesus!

The priests who judged and condemned Jesus were true priests of the one true God. Jesus never said that they were not. Yet they were the ones who engineered His crucifixion. It was not the criminals, the dregs of society, the scum of the earth, who crucified Jesus. They were up there getting crucified with Him. The people who put Jesus on the cross were the “good” people of the day, the “religious” people, the “church” people, the upholders of law and order, the leaders of the best religious movement of the time. They were respectable, law-abiding citizens. In other words, they were people like you and me! The name Christian and the sacred seal of baptism unfortunately do not vaccinate a person against injustice. They do not immunize us against the possibility of dipping our hands in innocent blood. The people who crucified Christ were not monsters but people like you and me who thought they were doing their duty. The same things that sent Jesus to the cross in the first century are things that are still being done by you and me today. And they disturb God as much today as they did then. Our sins today continue to crucify Christ. As long as there is evil in the world, the Lamb of God is still being slain. As an unknown monk of the Eastern Church wrote:

Master, Your passion has not ended. Your wounds are still bleeding. They are still crucifying You this very day. Where? One has only to read the newspapers. Your body is tortured, crucified everywhere, at all times, in your human members. [\[lxxxii\]](#)

When Jesus announced to His disciples that one of them would betray Him,

they each asked, “Lord, is it I?” Only Judas is pictured in the icon of the Last Supper dipping his hands in a bowl of water to wash his hands as he tries to absolve himself of responsibility. We are the ones who crucified and still crucify Jesus with our sins. That is why we keep praying the Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me the sinner.”

GOD IS IMPASSIBLE

When discussing the suffering Jesus endured for our salvation, it is important to bear in mind that Jesus was both man and God. His human nature suffered but not His divine nature. As God, He was impassible. Metropolitan Hierotheos emphasizes this point:

Christ was Godman, perfect God and perfect man. While there were two natures in Christ, the divine and the human, still the person, Christ the Godman, was one. The divine nature is impassible, while the human nature suffers. So at the time of the Passion while the human nature suffered, the impassible divine nature was not suffering with it, but Christ the Godman suffered, and He was crucified. A troparion of the Canon for Great Saturday says characteristically: “For though the earthly substance of Thy flesh suffered, yet the Godhead remained impassible.”^{[[lxxxiii](#)]}

As finite human beings, it is impossible for us to comprehend this. It is one of the mysteries of God that remains—and will remain—incomprehensible to us.

Meditating on the icon of the Crucifixion, we are reminded of the many wounds which Christ, the Godman, suffered in our behalf. In fact, Paul Evdokimov mentions that Christ once appeared to a believer and placed His hand on his face, but the believer relates that there was a hole in His hand through which he came to see and appreciate even more the meaning of what Jesus had suffered for us.

One Holy Week hymn summarizes His sufferings as follows:

Every member of Thy Body endured dishonor for us:

Thy Head, the thorns;

Thy Face, the spittings;

Thy Cheeks, the smitings;

Thy Mouth, the taste of vinegar;

Thine Ears, the impious blasphemies;

Thy Back, the lash;

Thy Hand, the reed;

Thy Whole Body, extension upon the Cross;
Thy Joints, the nails;
And Thy Side, the spear;
O Thou Who didst suffer for us, and set us free from suffering,
Who by Thy compassion didst stoop down to raise us up,
Almighty Savior, have mercy on us. Amen.

St. John Chrysostom adds,

Being God, He became man.
Being man, He became a slave.
Being a slave, He became a slave unto death.
Being a slave unto death, He was hanged on a cross.
What more can He do?

The *kenosis* or self-emptying love of God in our behalf is expressed especially through His Crucifixion. That is why the icon of the Crucifixion may be considered as the icon *par excellence* of His kenosis.

JESUS CONSIDERS HIS WOUNDS “PRECIOUS”

Metropolitan Hierotheos points out that Jesus regards His wounds on our behalf as “precious”:

While after His Resurrection His body is spiritual, He takes upon it the wounds of the Cross and shows them, regards them as an ornament, displays them to the angels and is glad to show He suffered for man. Thus He does not discard the wounds of the Cross, but keeps the signs of the butchery on His body. No one else has had such mad love as Christ had, for He not only tolerates being beaten, not only saves the ungrateful, but He regards His wounds as precious. And with these He is seated on the Royal throne and summons all to this royal crown. [\[lxxxiv\]](#)

The Old Testament prophets foretold that the Messiah would be “wounded for our transgressions,” but never could they have imagined that God would come down from His ultimate throne and suffer what He did in order to raise us to heaven, achieving victory through defeat.

AN UNPAYABLE DEBT

God's love for us as expressed in the Crucifixion icon creates a sense of an unpayable debt. We know that it is undeserved. We know that it cannot be forced, bought, or earned. We receive it as a gift, like a miracle. As St. Tikhon of Zadonsk said, "God loves us for nothing..." That is what creates in us "a sense of humility—not humiliation" (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh).

Archbishop Anastasios of Albania laments the fact that the Cross has created a comfortable type of Christian who delights in wearing the cross as an ornament but who often prefers to crucify others rather than to be crucified himself for others. We often forget St. Paul's words, "We have the privilege of not only knowing Christ, but of suffering for Him as well" (Phil. 1:18). The privilege of suffering for Christ is at the heart of the gospel.

"The power of the cross is the power of God," wrote Fr. Sergius Bulgakov. "Love has the character of the cross. There is no love that does not have the character of the cross."

G.K. Chesterton described the cross in these memorable words:

The Cross has always been called the sign of contradiction. It is the horizontal contradicted by the vertical. It is time contradicted by eternity. It is sin contradicted by forgiveness. It is death contradicted by life.

WESTERN AND EASTERN ICONOGRAPHY: A CONTRAST

Western art, especially since the Renaissance, has tended to place the emphasis more on the agony of the crucified Christ. By contrast, Eastern Christian iconography portrays Christ's face and posture on the Cross as serene and peaceful, devoid of sentimentality, since even in death Christ is Lord. The purpose of the icon is to portray the unfathomable depths of Christ's love for us. Far from overemphasizing the extreme torments of the dying Christ as in Western art, Eastern iconography of the Crucifixion takes pains to express that this is not just a man on the cross but the suffering God. Although His eyes are closed to represent a dead Jesus, some icons of the Crucifixion place the sun and the moon just above the outstretched arms of Jesus as if He were still holding them up. Still other icons picture the sun and the moon darkened as if in shock. When the Crucifixion is portrayed in the East, it shows Jesus triumphing on the Cross, reigning from it as a king. In the words of Paul Evdokimov, "The theology of the Cross has its proper place but does not predominate."

FOTIS KONTOGLU ON THE CRUCIFIXION ICON

We see the same in the Eastern icons of the Crucified Christ. As the famous iconographer Fotis Kontoglu wrote,

The forms and colors do not impart the frigid breath of death, but the sweet hope of immortality. Christ is depicted as standing on the cross, not as hanging on it. His body is of flesh, but flesh of another nature, flesh whose nature has been changed through the grace of the Holy Spirit. The expression of His face is full of heavenly tranquility; the affliction which has befallen Him is full of gentleness and forgiveness, exempt from agonized contractions of the face. It is the suffering redeemer, He Who has undone the pangs of death, Who has granted the peace of the life to come. This crucified body is not that of just anyone, but is the very Body of the God-man Himself; therefore it is not a corpse, but rather incorruptible to eternity, and the source of life. It radiates the hope of the Resurrection. The Lord does not hang on the cross like some miserable tatter, but it is He, rather, who appears to be supporting the Cross. His hands are not cramped, being nailed to the wood; rather he spreads them out serenely in the attitude of supplication, according to the troparion which says, “Thou hast spread thy palms, and united what before had been divided,” that is, God and man. I repeat, the forms and colors of the liturgical icon do not express the brute horror of death, but have the nobility and gentleness of eternal life. It is illumined by the sweet light of hope in Christ. It is full of the grace of the Paraclete. [\[lxxxv\]](#)

It must be stated that Fotis Kontoglu (1897-1965) made a very important contribution to the renaissance of Byzantine iconography in the Orthodox world. Christos Yannaras testifies to this when he writes,

Before Kontoglu, Byzantine art—indeed the whole Byzantine heritage—was held in contempt in Greece. Until the middle of the twentieth century it was taken for granted that churches should be decorated in the Italian Renaissance style. Even on Mount Athos the monks painted religious pictures rather than icons. Thanks to Kontoglu’s work and passionate enthusiasm, the climate changed radically. It is true that in Europe generally there was a renewal of interest in Byzantine art which helped the reception of Kontoglu’s work in

Greece, but this does not diminish his contribution. [\[lxxxvi\]](#)

THE SCANDAL OF THE CROSS

Looking at an icon of the Crucifixion, one of Dostoyevsky's characters said, "Don't you know a man might lose his faith looking at that picture?" He would not lose his faith but rather be strengthened in it if he considered the real meaning of the Crucifixion as Nicholas Berdyaev did when he wrote these words:

The problem of the justification of God in face of the measureless pain in the world has always been a source of infinite torment to me. I cannot admit the conception of an almighty, omniscient, punitive deity beholding this stricken world of ours; I can consent to and understand only the image of a loving, suffering, crucified God; I can, that is to say, only accept God through His Son. [\[lxxxvii\]](#)

NOT AN “INVENTED” GOD

Voltaire said once that if there were no God, man would have to invent Him. No doubt such an “invented” God would be all-wise, all-powerful, all-good, *etc.* But the God we see on the cross is anything but such an awesome God. He is in the words of Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh:

A God one would be ashamed of; a God who is vulnerable; a God who is defeated; A God who is humiliated; a God who is condemned by a human court; a God who takes on Himself total defenselessness...total weakness ...total vulnerability.

Such a God no one would invent, and no one could. That is why Christianity is more vulnerable in its faith than any other religion. [\[lxxxviii\]](#)

Both Dostoyevsky and Berdyaev were correct in saying that a person might lose his faith looking at an icon of the Crucifixion of Jesus. Berdyaev was right in saying that in a world of suffering, “I can only accept God through His Son.” Again, in the words of St. John Chrysostom, “I call Him King because I see Him crucified.”

“Come down from the cross and we will believe,” the crowd called out. We believe in Him because He did not come down. He stayed there for you and me.

OTHER DETAILS OF THE ICON

The halo around Christ's head is usually inscribed with the words "O On," "the One Who is." Above the head of Christ is an inscription INBI (Greek for "Jesus Nazarene King of Jews"). Latin crosses bear the inscription INRI, substituting the Latin word *Rex* for king instead of the Greek *Basileus*. In the background we often see the walls of the city of Jerusalem since crucifixions took place outside the city walls. The thief who repented is often shown on the right with a halo. Often the other two crucifixions that occurred at the same time are not always included. The lower piece of the cross to which Christ's feet were nailed was called a *suppendium* by the Romans. It was a standard part of the cross. On Christ's cross it is angled so that one end is slightly higher, pointing to the unseen thief who repented. The cross with a prominent angled *suppendium* is now called the Russian cross. Of the disciples, only John the youngest is pictured at the crucifixion. He is usually pictured as trying to close his eyes before the spectacle of his Master's death.

Mary the Theotokos is pictured at the right of Christ accompanied by other women. Her face shows a grief contained, dominated by intrepid faith (Lossky). Mary's posture addresses itself sympathetically to the grieving Apostle John. The figure next to John is the Roman centurion who was moved to confess, "Truly, this was the Son of God." The other women standing at the foot of the cross are suffering and empathizing with Christ. Among them is Mary Magdalene, who is called "equal to the apostles" in the Eastern Church. The entire event is not mythological but historical since it occurred historically "under Pontius Pilate." Although historical, it is also a great mystery involving each of us personally, since the Godman who died on the Cross is, in the words of St. Paul, the one "who loved me and gave Himself for me." Therefore, Orthodox Christians are not encouraged to confront the days of Holy Week only as history, but chiefly from the sacramental and spiritual aspect because we share personally in the event of reconciliation which took place on Good Friday. We share in it through participation in the sacraments of baptism, confession (repentance), and the Eucharist, through which we die and rise again in Christ as a new creation.

THE CROSS: A PLUS SYMBOL

The cross is also a *plus* symbol. As such, it has great meaning for us. Having been baptized and having received Christ in the Holy Eucharist, it means that we are God's PLUS people. Where there is no love, we add love. Where there is no hope, we add hope. Where there is no peace, we add peace. Where there is no forgiveness, we add forgiveness. Where there is darkness, we add light. And where there is sadness, we add joy. Why? Because we are God's plus people.

When we reverence the Cross at the end of a worship service, we remember to thank God for this great PLUS sign which adds to life the precious gifts of LOVE, HOPE, FORGIVENESS, POWER, JOY, ETERNAL LIFE, AND ULTIMATE VICTORY.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift!

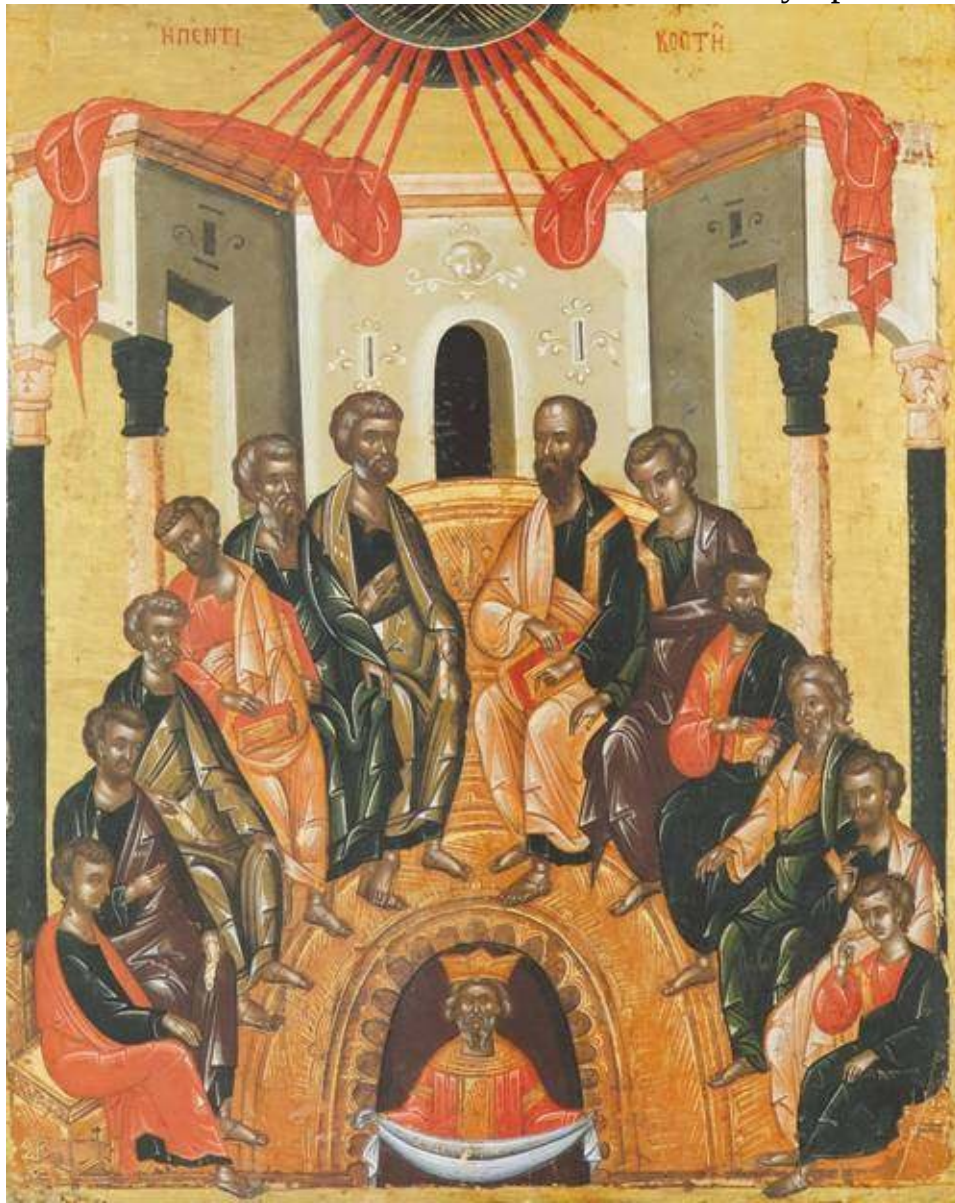
The Cross does not abolish suffering, but transforms it, sanctifies it, makes it fruitful, bearable, even joyful and finally VICTORIOUS. —**Joseph Rickady**

On this day, He who suspended the earth upon the waters, is hung on the tree. The King of Angels is crowned with a crown of thorns. He who adorned the heavens with clouds is arrayed in the purple of mockery. He who freed Adam in the Jordan bears to be struck. The spouse of the Church is nailed to the tree. The Son of the Virgin is pierced with a lance. Glory to Thy Passion, O Christ, Glory to Thy Passion! Reveal to us Thy holy Resurrection. —**A Good Friday Troparion**

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

***THE ICON OF THE DESCENT OF THE HOLY SPIRIT: ITS MESSAGE
(PENTECOST)***

The Descent of the Holy Spirit



Vladimir Lossky writes about this icon: “In the Orthodox Church, where there is no feast of the Holy Trinity in a literal sense, the Trinity is celebrated mainly on the first day of Pentecost—the Sunday—which is called Trinity Day. The liturgy on that day expounds the dogmatic teaching on the Holy Trinity, whose icon is brought out for veneration. The icon of the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles is brought out on the following day—Monday—which is dedicated to the Holy Spirit and is called the Spirit Day. Thus, two icons, totally different in their meaning and significance, correspond to the Feast of Pentecost.”[\[xxxix\]](#)

These words by Vladimir Lossky express a significant point. The Orthodox Church has two icons for Pentecost for use on two different days.

The icon of the Holy Trinity venerated on the Sunday of Pentecost is St. Rublev’s famous icon of the Holy Trinity which is also known as the icon of the Hospitality of Abraham (discussed elsewhere in this book).

The icon that we shall discuss in this chapter is that of the Descent of the Holy Spirit on the Apostles which is celebrated on the Monday after Pentecost Sunday. The Church gives a sense of priority to the revelation of the Holy Trinity on Sunday, without neglecting the outpouring of the Spirit on Monday, the feast of the Holy Spirit.

THE JEWISH PENTECOST AND THE CHRISTIAN PENTECOST

The Jewish Pentecost celebrated the giving of the Law to Moses on Mt. Sinai while the Christian Pentecost, celebrated on the same day, marked the giving of the Holy Spirit to the apostles as they were gathered in prayer in the Upper Room.

Metropolitan Hierotheos describes the difference between the two Pentecosts:

The difference between Sinai and the Upper Room in Jerusalem is seen in the difference between the law of the Old Testament and the law of the New Testament. In the old time the law was given on stone tablets, now the law is engraved on the hearts of the Apostles. The apostle Paul says: “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts” (2 Cor. 3:3). The descent of the Holy Spirit fulfilled the prophecy of the Prophet Jeremiah, as the Apostle Paul wrote: “I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Heb. 8:10).

The feast of Pentecost is a feast of the Holy Spirit, because we learn from the descent of the Holy Spirit that God is Threefold.”^[xc]

Thus, Pentecost for Orthodox Christians is both a feast of the Trinity (Sunday) and a feast of the Holy Spirit (Monday).

ORIGIN OF THE FEAST

The Feast of Pentecost marks the end of the Paschal season. The origins of this feast are derived from the Jewish Feast of the Weeks, which is also known as the Feast of Pentecost when the first fruits of the corn harvest were presented to the Lord (Deut. 16:9). The fact that the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles took place on the day of Pentecost enabled this Jewish feast to take on great significance for Christians. It became the occasion to celebrate the role of the Holy Spirit in the creation of the new chosen people (the new Israel) that would be operative in and through the Church. To this day the use of the service book for this period is called the *Pentecostarion* from the Greek word for the fiftieth day (*pentecoste*).

The first fruits of the harvest that were offered to God on the Pentecost of the New Testament were not agricultural crops as in the Old Testament, but rational human beings offered from the harvest which Christ Himself had prepared, i.e., the Holy Apostles.

THE ULTIMATE PURPOSE FOR CHRIST'S COMING

The coming of the Spirit is the ultimate purpose for which Christ came to earth. The Word took flesh, said St. Athanasius, that we might receive the Spirit. In one sense, the whole aim of the Incarnation is the sending of the Spirit at Pentecost. For having been redeemed, washed, and purified by the blood of Christ, we were made fit to receive the Holy Spirit. Lo! On the day of Pentecost He descends and fills the Church with His presence. The purpose for which Christ came is accomplished. God the Holy Spirit now abides among us until the end of time. If Christ is the head of the Church which is His body, the Holy Spirit is He who quickens the body and fills it with His presence.

One of the hymns of Pentecost calls this feast the fulfillment of a promise: "Let us believers joyfully celebrate a last feast: It is Pentecost, fulfillment and deadline of a promise." The Old Testament promise of God was, "I will pour out my Spirit on all people, your sons and daughters will prophesy, your old men will dream dreams" (Joel 2:28). Thus, if the Annunciation to the Theotokos is the beginning of the divine plan of salvation, Pentecost is the end, since it is then that we, through the Holy Spirit, become members of the risen body of Christ, the Church, which celebrates its birthday on Pentecost.

GOD WITHIN

Christmas is God *with* us. Good Friday is God *for* us. Pentecost is God *in* us. God's love envelops us. He is with us, for us, and in us. The Bible says, "God so loved the world that He gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16). God so loved us that He gave His only Son that we may have forgiveness and eternal life. But God's giving did not stop with His Son. On Pentecost He went further; He gave us the Holy Spirit, who would dwell within us to make our bodies temples of God: "Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit...?" (1 Cor. 6:19). "If anyone defiles the temple of God, God will destroy him. For the temple of God is holy, which temple you are" (1 Cor. 3:17).

OLD TESTAMENT PROPHECIES FULFILLED

Ezekiel foretells the coming of the Spirit when he writes: “I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes.... A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you” (Ezek. 36:26-27). So too Jeremiah: “I will make a new covenant.... I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts....” (Jer. 31:31,33). The words of Jeremiah and Ezekiel are the spiritual climax of the Old Testament. They describe the gift of the Spirit which Jesus is to give as the completion of His work of salvation, His last act in the setting up of the kingdom of heaven.

Just before his ascension, Jesus told the disciples that they would receive “power from the Holy Spirit” and become his witnesses “to the ends of the earth.” The disciples with the Theotokos then returned to the Upper Room where they continued in prayer. At last the event Jesus had promised—Pentecost—occurred:

Suddenly they heard what sounded like a powerful wind from heaven, the noise of which filled the entire house in which they were sitting, and something appeared to them which seemed like tongues of fire. These separated and came to rest on the heads of each of them. They were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak foreign languages as the Spirit gave them the gift of speech (Acts 2:2-4).

A SUDDEN ERUPTION

What actually happened on Pentecost has been helpfully illustrated by Lesslie Newbigin in his book, *The Household of God*. He says that when a prospector strikes oil, there is often a violent eruption of the oil which sometimes bursts into flames and burns for many days before it is brought under control. Later on there will be no room for such displays. The oil will be pumped through pipes and refineries. [\[xci\]](#)

There were fireworks on Pentecost—a sound from heaven, the rush of mighty wind, tongues of fire, and the gospel of Christ proclaimed by uneducated men in many languages. All of this had a terrific impact on the bystanders. They were witnessing a manifestation of divine power and they knew it.

“THE LORD”

To make it clear that the Holy Spirit is one with God, the Nicene Creed speaks of the Holy Spirit as “the Lord” in the same sense as it speaks of God the Father and God the Son as Lord. “I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of life.” Furthermore, the Creed goes on to say that the Holy Spirit is One...“Who with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified.”

THE GIVER OF LIFE

The Jews connected the Spirit of God with the work of creation. It was through His Spirit that God performed His creating work. In the beginning the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters and created a world (cosmos) out of chaos (Gen. 1:2). “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made,” said the psalmist, “and all the host of them by the breath of His mouth” (Psalm 33:6). “Thou sendest forth Thy Spirit, they are created” (Psalm 104:30). “The Spirit of God hath made me,” said Job, “and the breath of the Almighty hath given me life” (Job 33:4). Ezekiel draws his grim picture of the valley of dry bones. He tells how the dry bones came alive: He hears God say, “I shall put my spirit in you and you shall live” (Ezekiel 37:1-14). And lo: God breathes His Spirit upon those dry bones and they come to life. That same Spirit who brought order to chaos at creation, who breathed life into that in which there was no life, is come to breathe life into those who are dead in body, mind, soul, and heart, to renew and recreate life when all that life means is lost. The Holy Spirit was, is, and ever shall be the “Giver of Life.”

“SPIRIT”

The word “Spirit” has much to tell us about the third person of the Godhead. In many languages, the word “spirit” also means “breath.” In fact, when Christ first gave the Holy Spirit to His apostles at Easter, we are told that He “breathed and said to them, Receive the Holy Spirit....” This indicates that God the Holy Spirit is like the air we breathe. He is always present even though not always noticed. He is inside our bodies and outside and everywhere around us. He is the breath of God which fills us with life and power. Just as we breathe life back into a person whose own breathing has stopped, so God breathes His life into us through the Holy Spirit. The Spirit of God, always present to the spirit of man, surrounding and enveloping us with God’s presence—this is what the Holy Spirit is to us, to you and me: the God who breathes life into us.

Some night go outdoors and stand under the evening sky. Let your eyes reach out to the farthest star you can see. Then soar out billions and billions of stars into endless space. Think of God present out there. And isn’t that where many of us limit the presence of God? He’s “out there somewhere,” we say. Then, as you’re still looking up at those stars, billions of light years away, let the evening breeze caress your cheeks and tousle your hair. The Holy Spirit is God as near to you as the air that caresses your cheeks. You sigh, and He hears!

Breathe on me, breath of God
Fill me with life anew
That I may love what Thou dost love
And do what Thou dost do.

“GOD IS SPIRIT”

When the Bible says, “God is Spirit,” it often refers to the essence of God, which is unapproachable and incomprehensible as expressed by the word apophatic. The essence of God is apophatic, incomprehensible and totally beyond us.

When Christ is speaking to Nicodemus, He says, “God is Spirit,” but He goes on to say: “The Spirit blows where He wishes, and you do not know where He comes from and where He goes” (John 3:8). What our Lord is saying is that, like the wind, the Spirit cannot be defined in shape and substance. The Spirit blows and we cannot grasp Him with our hands. It is not like a river that flows in its bed. Although beyond us, the Spirit is perceived and felt by direct personal experience. The wind is blowing and we know it because our skin is refreshed, our hair is tousled, and we breathe easier. We know the wind is blowing because we have direct personal experience of it.

Thus, whereas our knowledge of Jesus, for example, is historical, our knowledge of the Holy Spirit is experiential. The Scriptures try to express the workings of the Holy Spirit in us by saying that the Spirit works within us in “groanings ineffable” (Rom. 8:26). He teaches us to say, “Abba, Father” (Gal. 4:6), *etc.* Of the three Persons of the Trinity, our knowledge of the Spirit is totally experiential, whereas our knowledge of the second person (Jesus) is also historical (the Incarnation).

Thus, the essence of God remains unapproachable, totally transcendent, and apophatic (“God is Spirit”). Yet the transcendent God reaches out to us through His energies: historically through the Incarnation (*enanthropoisis*) of God in Christ and experientially through the Holy Spirit.

We need to remember, however, that the historical Jesus can also become experiential through the Eucharist. In the words of St. Paul, “It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, Who loved me and gave Himself for me” (Gal. 2:20).

A DOVE AND TONGUES OF FIRE

The Holy Spirit has shown Himself twice to human eyes. At the baptism of Jesus He appeared as a dove and at Pentecost as tongues of fire over the Apostles' heads.

First, the dove. As long as we have had human records, the dove has been known as a guide for sailors. Whenever mariners wanted to know the direction or distance of land, they would release one or two doves from a cage. The bird would swiftly wing its way up, hang in the air for a moment, and then, like an arrow, fly to the nearest land. Then the sailors would point the prow of their ship in that direction, certain of land there. This practice has survived to our day among sailors and fishermen in India. The use of the dove to describe the Holy Spirit shows that the Spirit guides the Church to the truth of Christ and that in times of uncertainty the Holy Spirit, like a dove, soars above the clouds of doubt and leads the way to safety and security.

The tongues of fire that appeared over the Apostles' heads at Pentecost show that the Holy Spirit is like fire. Wherever He is present, people are on fire with enthusiasm. In fact, the word "enthusiasm" derives from two Greek words meaning "God within." When God the Holy Spirit is within us, we are on fire, filled with vigor, zest, and life. Like fire, the Holy Spirit also refines away sin and purifies from evil.

ANOTHER SPIRIT: ARROGANCE

Elder Ephraim points out something important in this respect, warning us against another spirit that seeks to invade our hearts—arrogance:

Be careful of the spirit of arrogance. Do not think that you have something that others do not have, for the Holy Spirit distributes Himself to each one of us as He wills. To one He appears as love, to another as wisdom, to another as knowledge, to another as great fear of God—one and the same Spirit. That is, all partake of the Holy Spirit, not according to one's works, but according to one's humility!^{[\[xcii\]](#)}

The Holy Spirit will not abide in a heart that is proud and arrogant but only in a heart that is humble.

THE SPIRIT OF TRUTH

The fourth Gospel refers to the Holy Spirit as “the Spirit of Truth” (John 14:17; 16:13). The Holy Spirit has a special ministry in regards to truth:

1. The Spirit teaches God’s truth: “He will teach you all things” (John 14:26).
2. The Spirit reminds us of the truth: “He will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (John 14:26). More than anything else we need to be reminded again and again of that which we already know about God. This is one of the important functions of the Holy Spirit: to call to memory the saving truth of Jesus which we can so easily forget.
3. The Spirit not only teaches God’s truth and reminds us of God’s truth, He also brings new truth. “I have yet many things to say to you, but you cannot hear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth” (John 16:12-13). Just as God spoke in the past through the prophets and supremely through Jesus, so He will continue to speak and teach to the end of time through the Holy Spirit. To each generation the Holy Spirit will bring the truth it needs in the form it needs.

HOW DOES THE HOLY SPIRIT IMPART HIS TRUTH TO US TODAY?

The Orthodox Church believes that the Church, which is the body of Christ, is also the temple and dwelling place of the Holy Spirit.

In the Church, the bishop is appointed by God to rule and teach the flock committed to his care. At his consecration, the bishop receives a special gift (charisma) of the Holy Spirit to act as teacher of the faith. But the Church as the body of Christ includes the lay people who must eventually approve (accept) what the bishops decide in Council. Thus it is the Holy Spirit abiding in the entire Church, consisting of clergy and lay people, who guides the Church to the truth of God (Sobornost). The Holy Spirit cannot be placed in a box and measured (limited) by teaching that the bishop has the fullest, the priest somewhat less, and the lay person the least measure of grace. The Spirit blows where He will and cannot be contained. He works in and through every member of the body of Christ.

As Nicholas Zernov wrote,

It is the Holy Spirit, speaking and acting through the whole body of believers, who is the teacher and guardian of truth. Each Christian, therefore, hears the voice of the Spirit; but because the same voice speaks to the other members of the same body, only unanimous decisions reached in an atmosphere of humble obedience and concord can be treated as expressing the divine will.
[\[xciii\]](#)

THE LAITY IS NOT IRRELEVANT

Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh had some powerful words to say about the fact that the Holy Spirit speaks to each one of us in the body of Christ, the Church, not just to bishops and clergy, but also to lay people:

Now the temptation for the Church, as for every other human organization, is to structure itself according to worldly principles, principles of hierarchy, of power—as a hierarchy of submission, a hierarchy of enslavement, of humiliation, of irrelevance. Take the hierarchy of irrelevance for instance. In more than one community—practically speaking, very much in our Orthodox communities, and theologically in Rome—the laity is an irrelevance. It is a flock to be guided. It has no right in and of itself except to obey, to be directed towards the goal that allegedly, the hierarchy knows. In its extreme form, the Church is conceived as a pyramid at the top of which stands the Pope. To me, this is a heresy against the nature of the Church, because no one but the Lord Jesus Christ has a right to stand at the top of that pyramid. It is not a question of whether this means that the Church will be well administered, but of the very nature of the Church....The structure that we are entitled to speak of is that which Christ defines when he says, “If anyone wants to be the first, let him be a servant to all” (Mark 9:35). The hierarchy consists in service. Unless we do this, we cannot think of structures that are an image of the Holy Trinity.

We do not have in the Holy Trinity—I am about to say something quite blasphemous—a “top dog” with subservient slaves. God the Father is not the “boss” of the Trinity, with two managers....The Church is called to be: a living body, an “organism of love”—but not sentimentally.... It is not difficult for a bishop to feel himself as the head of the body, surrounded by lesser and lesser ministers.... But this is untrue.... And so when we speak of the hierarchy we need to realize that we must recapture a true approach to hierarchy: a hierarchy in which there is no dominion, no power. God chose to be powerless when he gave us freedom, the right to say “no” to whatever he says. But God in Christ, God in the Spirit has another quality. Not power, which is the ability to coerce, but authority, which is the ability to convince. And that is a very different thing. [\[xciv\]](#)

Thus, the Holy Spirit abides and inspires not just one member of the body or

one class of clergy, but the entire body. He guides the entire body to the knowledge of truth (Sobornost).

PARACLETE

The Apostle John calls the Holy Spirit *parakletos*, the Paraclete, which has been translated into English as *comforter*. The translation, however, seriously limits the profound meaning of the word *parakletos* which means far more than a person who gives solace and comfort in time of sorrow. In Greek *parakletos* means one who is called in to help in some way. It derives from two Greek words: *para* and *kalo*. “I call to my side.” The person I call to my side may be a witness to give evidence for my defense; an attorney called in to plead my case; a wise friend who is called in to give me needed advice; a doctor called in to offer healing; a person called in to instill hope in me when I have lost hope. Better than *comforter*, then, as a translation for *parakletos* would be the word *paraclete* itself or *helper*; someone who is called in to empower a person to cope with circumstances in life that are overwhelming. This, clearly, is expressive of an important function of the Holy Spirit in life. He is the Paraclete, the *Parakletos*, the one who delivers, saves, and sanctifies.

The fact that Jesus says that He will send “another Paraclete” means that He too (Jesus) is a Paraclete. Of course, God the Father is also a Paraclete, for consolation is a common action of the triune God. The word Paraclete, however, is reserved in Scripture for the Holy Spirit.

“WHO PROCEEDS FROM THE FATHER”

Originally, the holy fathers who composed the Nicene Creed stated that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” Later the Western Church arbitrarily inserted the words, “and from the Son,” meaning that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. This is the famous “filioque” clause that was a cause of much friction between the Eastern and Western Churches. The Orthodox Church has preserved the Nicene Creed in its original form without the “filioque” as many of the early popes tried to do but failed. The *filioque* addition was not accepted by the Orthodox East for the following reasons:

First, the Ecumenical Councils forbade any changes to be introduced into the Creed except by another Ecumenical Council. The Creed belongs to the whole Church, and one small part of the Church has no right to alter it. Secondly, the Orthodox believe the “filioque” to be scripturally and theologically untrue. The Orthodox Church logically thinks that God knows best about Himself. It was Jesus Himself who said, “When the Paraclete has come, whom I will send to you from the Father—He will bear witness to me” (John 15:26). Orthodoxy has always taught what the Bible teaches: Christ sends the Spirit, but the Spirit proceeds from the Father. This preserves the unity in the Godhead according to which the Father is the unique origin and source of the Trinity. Thus, the Spirit who descended upon the apostles on Pentecost “proceeds from the Father,” says the Nicene Creed.

“WHO SPOKE BY THE PROPHETS”

In the Old Testament it was the Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets to speak to man about God. The Spirit of the Lord came upon Saul, and he prophesied among the prophets (1 Sam. 10:10). David says, “The Spirit of the LORD speaks by me, his word is upon my tongue” (2 Sam. 23:2). Ezekiel says, “The Spirit of the LORD fell upon me and said to me, ‘Thus says the LORD’” (Ezekiel 11:5). This same Spirit who spoke through the prophets of old speaks to us today through the Holy Bible and the Church to guide us to know the will of God for our lives.

ELECTRIFYING EFFECTS

The effects of Pentecost were electrifying. The disciples who had been cowards now proclaimed the Word of God openly with boldness. They who had been obsessed with fear, now “with great power gave their testimony of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 4:33). Old barriers and prejudices were broken down. The early Christians were now “of one heart and one soul” (Acts 4:32). Each understood the gospel in their own language. The barriers to communication were down. It was the tower of Babel in reverse. Each one now understood one’s neighbor. A new sense of unity prevailed. New hope invaded the world. Bridges of love began to form. Outsiders remarked, “These men are turning the world upside down.” They lived together, sharing all their goods in common, and gave the proceeds of what they sold to those who had nothing. Outsiders thought these early Christians were drunk. But Peter observed soberly, “These men are not drunk as you suppose, since it is only the third hour of the day” (Acts 2:15). The reaction shows the impression which was made: the excitement of speech, the elation, the complete loss of self-consciousness, not concerned at all with what people thought about them, or how they looked, or what would happen to them. They were people who were beside themselves. St. Paul wrote later to the Ephesians, “Do not get drunk with wine...but be filled with the Spirit” (Eph. 5:18). It was not wine but the Spirit that made the difference.

Here is the key to the revolutionary power of the Christian faith: the descent of the Spirit on the day of Pentecost. He descended and He continues to descend upon us as the Paraclete. As He descended on Jesus at His baptism in the form of a dove, so now the Spirit descends on each one of us at baptism through the sacrament of Chrismation.

A PRAYER THAT GOD WILL NEVER REFUSE

The Spirit comes to us also through prayer. Paul Evdokimov assures us that God will never refuse a prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit:

God hears all prayers without guarantee of their fulfillment, all except this call for the coming down of the Spirit. The Lord said: “If you know how to give good things to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him for this” (Luke 11:13). To refuse such a request would be to deny the very nature of the giver. [\[xcv\]](#)

That is why almost every service of the Church includes the prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit: “Heavenly King, Paraclete, Spirit of Truth...come and dwell in us....” It is a prayer that we need to pray daily.

WHAT THE SPIRIT CAN MEAN TO US TODAY

We have seen what the Holy Spirit meant to the early apostles; let us see what He can mean to us today.

Among electricians there is what is known as “house power.” Frequently, we see ads in the newspapers asking the question: “Is your house supplied with enough power to run all the things you need to use for adequate living? If not, then you are constantly blowing fuses when too heavy a ‘load’ is placed on your ‘house power.’” Does not the same thing happen in our personal lives? Think of the heavy demands that are made on our “personal power” every day. Think of the power we need to face the many problems and temptations of life. Think of the inner strength we need to cope with the pressures of everyday living. When we do not have sufficient inner power, what happens? We blow fuses—“blow our tops”—as we put it. We go to pieces. We fall apart. It is a sign of frustration, or inadequacy, to face the demands of living.

It was the Spirit of God breaking through at Pentecost who gave the apostles the inner power to face all outside pressures victoriously. “We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us,” writes St. Paul. The same Holy Spirit is available to us today. “You shall receive power, after the Holy Spirit comes to you,” Christ promised. This promise was directed not only to the early apostles but also to us today.

NO WORSE ADVICE

No worse advice can be given to people who have reached the end of their rope than to tell them to try harder. They have already exhausted themselves by trying too hard. What they need is not more effort but more resources, not more pressure on the accelerator but more gas in the tank, more power. This is the power God makes available to us in the Holy Spirit. And this power is always just a prayer away from us. Remember that the Holy Spirit came to the apostles *as they were praying* in the Upper Room.

SPIRITUAL WINGS

In fact, St. Macarius compares the power of the Holy Spirit to spiritual wings. He writes in his *Spiritual Homilies*:

When God created Adam he did not give him bodily wings like the birds but prepared for him in advance the wings of the Holy Spirit—the wings he desires to give him in the resurrection—to lift him up and carry him wherever the Spirit wishes. Saintly souls receive these wings even now when they take flight in the spirit toward heavenly thoughts.

HOW CAN I KNOW?

A little girl asked her dad one day, "This morning in Sunday school we talked about the Holy Spirit coming to live with us. How can I know if the Spirit is inside of me?"

Her father thought for a moment and said, "Remember what happened on the way home from church this morning?"

"You mean the flat tire?"

"Yes," said her dad. "That flat tire may help answer your question. The air in tires can hold up the weight of a car or truck or even a grounded airplane. You cannot see the air but you know it's there because you can see what it's doing, what it's holding up."

"We're a little like a tire," her father continued. "When the Holy Spirit is within us, we're strong and able to keep our faith even when we have to endure great trouble. But without Him, our lives are spiritually flat and dead." "Take not your Holy Spirit from me," cries the psalmist.

Scientists tell us that pressing down on every square inch of our bodies is 15 pounds of pressure. Our bodies can stand this pressure only because there is an equal amount of inward pressure pushing up against it. The pressure is thus equalized.

How much pressure do we have bearing down on our minds and souls every day! How much sin! How much sorrow! How much temptation! How much grief! How much trouble! How much fear! How much anxiety! How can we withstand all this outer pressure without the internal power which only the Holy Spirit can provide?

No wonder the psalmist cries, "Take not your Holy Spirit from me." Take anything else I have, but not the one thing that makes life livable. As long as I have the Spirit of God, every desolation, every grief is at least bearable. But if once that Spirit should go, then gone is all my reinforcement: no light to guide me, no voice to give meaning to life, no hand to steady and control me. "Take not your Holy Spirit from me," cried the Psalmist.

HOW DO WE RECEIVE THE HOLY SPIRIT?

Pentecost is always happening in the Church. The Holy Spirit is offered in baptism, in prayer, in the Eucharist, and especially in the sacrament of Chrismation, which is the sacrament of Pentecost. Yet the gift of the Spirit in the sacramental life of the Church may be ignored, neglected, rejected, and “quenched,” as St. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 5:19. Having received the Spirit in baptism and Chrismation, we can grow away from Him by serving the works of the flesh. This is why repentance—daily repentance—is so necessary in order to receive the Holy Spirit. Repentance is the re-opening of the heart to God, the de-cramping of the heart which was previously cramped with the works of sin.

As St. Peter said, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). If you have been baptized and have forgotten what it means to be a disciple of Christ, repent and turn back to Christ and His Church where He waits to offer you two great gifts: forgiveness of sins and the Holy Spirit. The Spirit will not come to a person who sets himself up against God. He will only come to him who lines his life up with the will of God. Just as the Gulf Stream can flow through a piece of straw if it is placed parallel to the stream, so the Holy Spirit is given to those whose lives are in harmony with the will of God. This is why St. Peter speaks of “the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32).

CONSTANTLY ATTAINED

The Holy Spirit must be constantly attained. He should be received daily. To achieve this, it is necessary to wait prayerfully and expectantly for Him as the apostles did before Pentecost. “All these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer...” (Acts 1:14). This kind of prayerful waiting is essential if we are to receive the Holy Spirit. Thus faithful Orthodox Christians pray daily the Orthodox prayer to the Holy Spirit: “Heavenly King, Paraclete, Spirit of Truth... come and dwell in us....”

THE HOLY “GUEST”

The word *ghost* used in the *Holy Ghost* is believed to be the old Saxon word for *guest*. Whether or not this is so, it may certainly be said that the Holy Ghost is the Holy Guest—the best guest we can ever receive and entertain in our lives. He comes as God to abide within each one of us. He comes as power. He comes as knowledge and wisdom. He comes as the breath of God to give us new life. He comes as the Great Awakener. He comes as the greatest gift God can give us. He comes as refreshing water to man’s parched soul: “If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink,” said Jesus. “He who believes in me as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in him were to receive” (John 7:37-39). He comes, and the fruits of His presence are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23). He comes, and though previously our ideas of Him may have been vague and nebulous, surely now we can see that in the scheme of God’s salvation there is no more important person than the Holy Ghost.

There is no greater privilege than to open one’s heart through prayer to receive the Holy *Guest*—especially in every liturgy when we kneel and pray with the priest the *epiclesis* prayer asking the Father to send the Spirit upon us first and then upon the bread and the wine to transform them and us into the body of Jesus. The *epiclesis* prayer in every liturgy is the moment of Pentecost for each one of us.

That is why the Orthodox Church is more Pentecostal than all the “Pentecostal” churches put together. The “Amens” of the congregation at this point involve us in the consecration of the gifts.

AN EXPLANATION OF THE ICON

The first distinguishing factor of the icon of the Descent of the Holy Spirit is that the twelve apostles sit on a semi-circular bench facing each other. In few other icons do we see the apostles in such a state of oneness. The great variety of colors and gestures of the apostles convey the truth that unity does not necessarily mean that there is no diversity. Some believe that the semi-circle represents the omnipresence of God. They refer to it as the semi-circle of heaven. In reality it is a symbol of a Church unified by the Holy Spirit.

In the icon, no figure is identical with any other to show that “there are diversities of gifts...” and “there are diversities of operations.” To one is given by the Spirit the Word of Wisdom; to another the Word of Knowledge...to another the gifts of healing...” and so forth (1 Cor. 12:4-31). But it is the same Spirit who grants these gifts.

Another manifestation of the Paraclete, the rush of the wind cannot be shown visibly, but it can be noticed indirectly by looking at the surprised expressions on the faces of the apostles. Perhaps more than anything else, this icon shows the community of apostles at prayer, waiting silently on the Lord in the Upper Room for the coming of the Paraclete.

Some icons show rays of light descending upon the apostles to signify the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. There are twelve rays or tongues of fire to represent their baptism with the Holy Spirit and with fire according to the prophecy of John the Forerunner (Matt. 3:2). Sometimes tongues of fire are placed in the halos or just above the heads to show that the Holy Spirit descended in the form of tongues.

The confusion of tongues that resulted at the building of the tower of Babel is now replaced by a new knowledge of languages granted to the apostles by the Holy Spirit to create a harmonious unity in the Church.

The apostles are represented in this icon in a *non-historical* way. Several of the apostles who were in the Upper Room at Pentecost are replaced by Paul and the Gospel writers Mark and Luke since they were the ones through whom the gospel was preached “to the ends of the earth.”

When Paul is shown, he is usually shown on the top right next to Peter.

THE “COSMOS” FIGURE

In ancient icons, the multitudes mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles were pictured at the bottom of the icon representing the entire Church. In time they were replaced by one symbolical figure representing all of us. It is the figure called “Cosmos,” meaning the world. Cosmos sits in a dark place, bowed down with years (and thus an old man). He is usually dressed in a red garment with a royal crown on his head. In his right hand he holds a white cloth containing twelve scrolls.

He sits in a dark place since the entire world before Christ had been without faith. He is bowed down by years for he was made old by the sin of Adam. The royal crown signifies sin, or the passions, which had ruled the world. The white cloth in his hands with the twelve scrolls represents the twelve apostles who brought light to the world by their teaching.

Thus, each one of us is represented in the icon of the Descent of the Holy Spirit since in Orthodox worship we become contemporaries of the event (Pentecost) that we celebrate. How? Through prayer and through the liturgy which is a continuation of the mystery of Pentecost. For the liturgy is Pentecost as well as Pascha. Thus, for Orthodox Christianity, Pentecost is a continuous feast. Holy Spirit of truth Sovereign Lord of the Universe, guide and guardian of your people present everywhere, overflowing all that exists:

Come and dwell in us cleanse us from all sin; pour out your blessings on us, give us fresh life, and in your gracious love bring us to salvation. Amen. — **Orthodox Prayer to the Holy Spirit** (Translated by Scott Cairns)

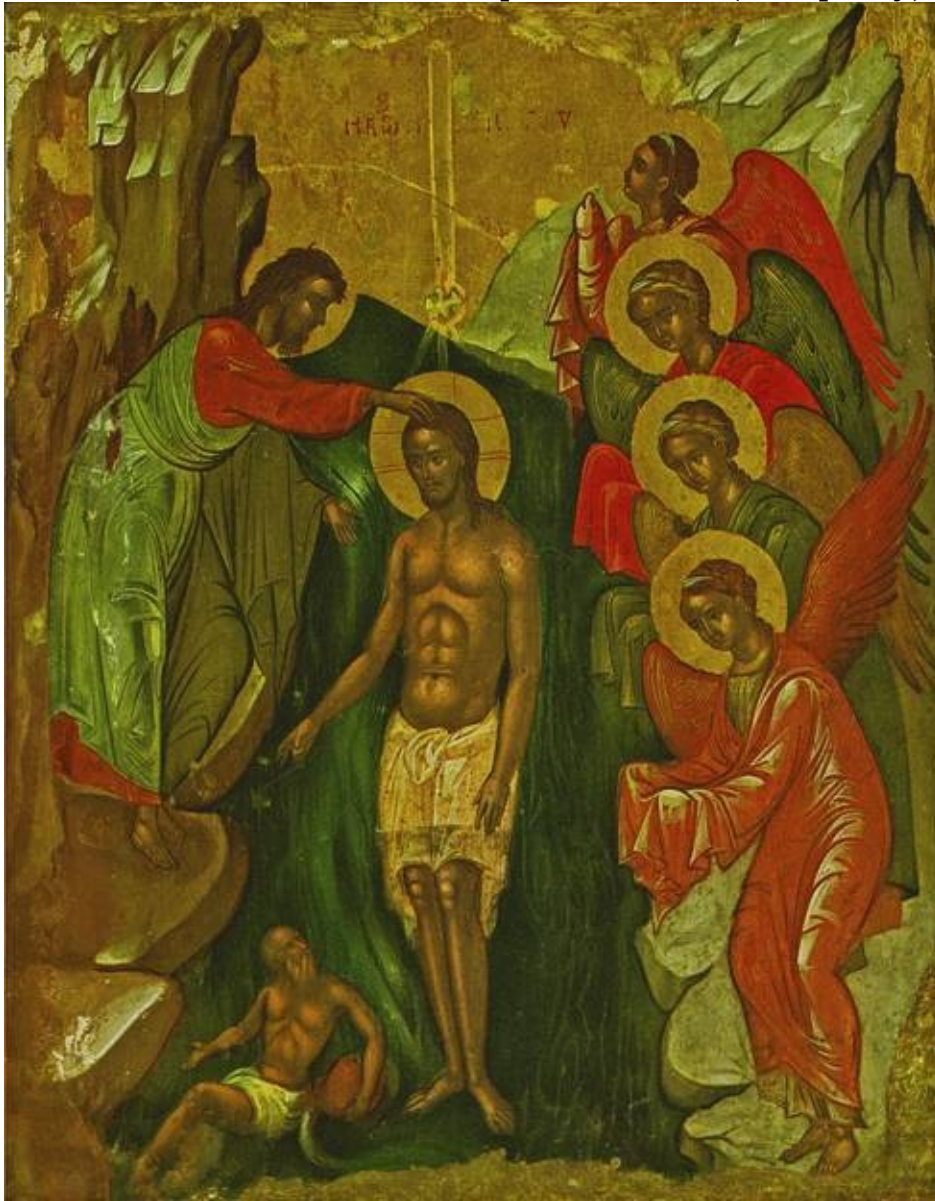
The Dismissal Hymn of Pentecost (*apolytikion*) says:

Blessed art Thou, O Christ our God, Who didst render the fishermen all-wise by sending down upon them the Holy Spirit, and through them didst draw the world unto Thee. O Thou Who dost love mankind, glory be to Thee.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

***THE ICON OF THE BAPTISM OF JESUS (THEOPHANY) SPEAKS: ITS
MESSAGE***

The Baptism of Jesus (Theophany)



The Feast of Theophany commemorates the baptism of Jesus in the Jordan River by St. John the Forerunner, also called the Baptist. It took place when Jesus reached the age of thirty years and marked the beginning of His public ministry. The event is described by all four Gospel writers (Matt. 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34). It is celebrated annually on January 6. The following day, January 7, the Synaxis of St. John the Baptist is celebrated. A Synaxis is usually celebrated the day following a major feast day to honor a person who played a major role in the Feast, i.e., in this case John the Forerunner.

HISTORY OF THE FEAST

This Feast was celebrated from the fourth century onward. Its primary focus was the baptism of Jesus, an event in which the Holy Trinity was revealed, manifesting God in His fullness as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Hence, the name Epiphany or Theophany, two Greek words signifying the appearance of God in His fullness. The Feast points to the origins of baptism. St. John Chrysostom (c. 347-407) highlights the great importance of this Feast when he writes, “It was not the day when Christ was born that should be called Epiphany (Theophany), but the day when He was baptized. Not through His birth did He become known to all, but through His Baptism. Before the day of His Baptism, He was not known to the people.” St. Luke tells us that the baptism took place “in the days of Herod, King of Judea” (Luke 1:5). In other words, it was an historical, not a mythological event. It is a feast that ranks third in importance on the Christian calendar in the East after Pascha and Pentecost.

St. Matthew provides us with one of the Scriptural accounts of the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17):

Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John, to be baptized by him. John would have prevented him, saying, “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus answered him, “Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.” Then he consented. And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:13-17).

The *apolytikion* (dismissal hymn) of the feast also describes what happened on this day:

When Thou wast baptized in the Jordan, O Lord, the worship of the Trinity was made manifest; for the voice of the Begetter bore witness to Thee, calling Thee His beloved Son; and the Spirit in the form of a dove confirmed the certainty of the statement. O Christ our God, Who didst appear and illuminate the world, glory be to Thee.

DID JESUS NEED TO BE BAPTIZED?

St. Augustine answered this question centuries ago when he said, “No baptism was necessary for Christ, but He received the baptism of a servant to encourage us to receive His baptism.” It was part of His kenosis, His complete self-emptying. He identifies Himself with every sinner in need of forgiveness. He becomes one of us in all things except sin in order to make us partakers of his perfect and sinless life. He stands in line with sinners—He who is without sin—waiting to be baptized by John. That is how much He chose to enter into solidarity with sinful humanity. We read, “John tried to dissuade him with the words, ‘It is I who need baptism from you, and yet you come to me.’ But Jesus replied, ‘Leave it like this for the time being; it is fitting that we should, in this way, do all that uprightness demands’” (Matt. 3:14-15). The humility of Jesus in asking John to baptize Him underscores the gospel message that the Son of Man came not to rule but to serve and offer Himself for the sins of the world. As St. Paul writes, “For our sake he (God the Father) made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

St. John of Damascus says that Christ was baptized not because He had need of purification “but to identify Himself with our purification.”

A troparion (hymn) of Theophany explains one of the reasons Jesus desired to be baptized by John:

Christ comes to grant through baptism deliverance to all the faithful. For thereby He cleanses fallen Adam and lifts him up, putting to shame the tyrant who had laid him low; He opens the heavens, brings down the divine Spirit and grants man a share of incorruption.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN JOHN'S BAPTISM AND THAT OF JESUS

We must note here the difference between the baptism of John and that of Jesus. John's baptism was a "baptism of repentance" for the forgiveness of sins (Mark 1:4-5). The baptism of Jesus went far beyond this. As Fr. Thomas Hopko writes:

Baptism is the symbol of death and resurrection; Christ came to the earth in order to die and be raised. Baptism is a symbol of repentance of sin, and its forgiveness; Christ came as the Lamb of God who takes upon Himself the sin of the world in order to take it away. Baptism is a symbol of sanctification; Christ has come to sanctify the whole of creation. Baptism is a symbol, finally, of radical renewal. When one is baptized the old is over and the new has come. And Christ has appeared on earth to bring all things to an end, and to make all things new. The act of baptism, therefore, contains in symbol the entire mystery of Christ, the whole purpose of His coming. [\[xcvi\]](#)

In the words of Norman Russell, "Christ was baptized as the recipient of salvation, receiving the Spirit in our behalf in virtue of his humanity. This humanity, even though free of sin, still needed to be recreated in the divine image." [\[xcvii\]](#) This is accomplished through the sacrament of baptism through which we "put on Christ." We die with Him and are raised with Him, becoming "partakers of divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4). For St. Athanasius, the adoption effected by baptism is equivalent to deification (theosis), which is best described as Christification.

WHY WAS JESUS BAPTIZED?

Fr. Sergius Bulgakov, a noted Orthodox theologian, had this to say about why Jesus desired to be baptized:

...[H]aving become the lamb who takes upon Himself the sin of the world, He also desired to take upon Himself the form of repentance, diminishing Himself down to the latter in infinite humility and obedience to the Father. And this assumption of the form of a servant was a sacrifice to the Father and the fulfillment of His righteousness....

The God-Man was baptized in order that, in Him and with Him, all human kind might be baptized, in the baptismal waters sanctified by Him. [\[xcviii\]](#)

Bishop Kallistos Ware answers the same question of why Jesus insisted on being baptized. He explains what happened when Jesus stepped into the waters of the Jordan River:

Christ's Baptism is seen in the Orthodox tradition as possessing a cosmic significance, as embracing the whole created order. His Baptism is in a sense the reverse of our own. In our case, Baptism is a purification from sin. But Christ is sinless; why, then, should He be baptized? Such precisely is the query posed by St. John the Baptist: "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" (Mt. 3:14). The Orthodox answer to this question can best be put in simple picture language. We are dirty; at Baptism we go down into clean water and we come out cleansed.

At our Baptism, then, we are sanctified by the waters. But Christ is clean; at His Baptism He goes down into the dirty water and Himself cleanses the waters, making them pure. As we affirm in the liturgical texts for the feast of Epiphany, "Today the Master has come to sanctify the nature of the waters." At His Baptism it is not the waters that sanctify Christ, but Christ who imparts holiness to the waters, and so by extension to the entire material creation. [\[xcix\]](#)

HOLY WATER DISTRIBUTED ON THEOPHANY

It is for this reason that water is blessed on this day of the baptism of Jesus and offered to worshippers for their sanctification. Many of the same prayers are used in this service as are used in baptism for the sanctification of the baptismal water. Thus, it is not the waters that sanctify Christ, but Christ who sanctifies the waters and by extension the entire material creation, which includes us. St. Ignatius teaches that the contact of our Lord's body with the water of the Jordan is the principle behind the sanctifying action of water in the sacrament of baptism.

BAPTISM IS OUR TRIP TO THE JORDAN

Thus every baptized Christian can say, “Baptism is my departure out of chaos into the order of the forgiven life. It is my visitation by the Spirit who broods over this water of life. It is my deliverance from the destroying floods, my passage through the Red Sea of sin. Baptism is my trip to the Jordan. In this water I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, sharing His living water. The old, sinful nature is drowned in these waters and I rise, as from a grave, to share in the new life of Christ. The waters of baptism are my waters of Siloam and my pool of Bethesda. The Spirit breathes upon this water, and I enter to be bathed with God’s forgiveness, His grace, His love, and healing.”

WHO IS JOHN THE BAPTIST?

St. John the Forerunner is the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets. He was chosen by God to introduce the Messiah to the world. It is for this reason that his icon is situated next to Christ on the iconostasis where he often is depicted pointing a finger to Christ next to him, identifying Him as the Lamb of God. He Himself states in the Gospel of John that he did not know who the Messiah was until that day. We read, “And John bore witness, saying, ‘I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and He remained upon Him. I did not know Him, but He who sent me to baptize with water said to me, upon whom you see the Spirit descending and remaining on Him, this is he who baptizes with the Holy Spirit. And I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God’” (John 1:32-34).

THE ICON SPEAKS

In the icon John is seen officiating. He places his right hand on the head of the Savior in a sacramental gesture that has remained a part of the ritual of baptism. With his left hand he makes a gesture that proclaims, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). God thus uses the Forerunner to answer the question that was asked by Isaac of his father Abraham at the aborted sacrifice, “Where is the lamb?” (Gen. 22:7). Thousands of years later, God answers the question through the Forerunner: “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world” (John 1:29).

THE HAND OF THE FORERUNNER

One of the hymns of this Feast elaborates on the hand of the Forerunner:

The hand of the Baptist trembled,
When he touched Your most pure head.
The river Jordan turned back,
Not daring to minister to You.
For how could that river which stood in awe of Joshua, the son of Nun,
Not be afraid before Joshua's Creator?
But You, O Savior, have fulfilled all that was appointed,
That You might save the world by Your Epiphany,
O Only Lover of Man! ^[c]

NOT BY SPRINKLING BUT IMMERSION

The Forerunner is not shown, as in many Western religious paintings, sprinkling water on the Lord's head, since the baptism of Jesus was not by sprinkling but by immersion. The icon depicts His body in the waters of the Jordan River. The Greek word *baptism* means not sprinkling but total immersion. See Matthew 3:16 and Mark 1:10.

GREATER THAN ANY BORN OF WOMAN

The very name John means “gift of God.” The Forerunner was such a gift. Since Jesus is the sun of righteousness, the bright sun of divinity, the forerunner is the one who brings the dawn; the morning star which foretells the coming of the sun. Orthodox tradition regards the Forerunner (Prodromos), after the Mother of God, as the greatest among men. As the Lord said, “...among those born of women, there has risen none greater than John the Baptist” (Matt. 11:11).

The Master proclaimed you to be a prophet,
Higher than all the prophets
And greater than any born of woman.
For the One whom all the prophets and the Law foretold,
You have beheld in the flesh.
Thus is He truly the Christ.
And being more honored than all,
You have baptized Him. [\[ci\]](#)

“HE MUST INCREASE” (John 3:30)

It is interesting that the Feast of the Nativity of John the Baptist is celebrated annually on June 24 on the Orthodox calendar. This was done by the Greek fathers, because on this day, daylight slowly begins to decrease in the northern hemisphere. This reminds us of the Baptist’s famous saying: “I must decrease, He (Jesus) must increase” (John 3:30). After the baptism of Jesus, the ministry of John the Baptist was fulfilled. John began to decrease as the saving ministry of Jesus increased.

NOT A VOCATIONAL AWAKENING

It must be stated here that a broad segment of liberal Protestant scholarship has misinterpreted the baptism of Jesus as a sort of vocational awakening of Jesus to His special God-given ministry. It was at His baptism, they believe, that Jesus became aware of His special relationship to God and His religious mission. But none of this can be found in the biblical texts or in the apostolic history of the Church. Jesus remains God's "beloved Son," wholly Other, yet at the same time like unto us in everything except sin. He is far beyond our psychologizing of Him. In the words of blessed Augustine, "He is more interior to us than we are to ourselves."

THE TREE WITH AN AXE

In some versions of this icon there is often a tree with an axe at its root. This represents John's words, "Repent, bring forth good fruit, for the long-awaited Messiah has come," and "the axe is lying at the root of the trees," which means that the time of judgment and decision has arrived (Matt. 3:7-12).

THE NAKEDNESS OF JESUS

Some icons depict Jesus with a loin cloth. Others, however, show Him quite naked. This is in accordance with the texts of the Theophany services. His startling nakedness serves to express the utter kenosis of His divinity. “He strips Himself Who clothes the heavens with clouds,” chants the priest on Holy Friday. This is expressed in the truth that by stripping His body, He thereby clothes the nakedness of Adam and all humankind with the garment of glory and incorruptibility. We, too, are baptized naked as we are immersed in the baptismal font. Why? To show that we come to Him naked, bringing nothing but ourselves since salvation is not by works but by God’s grace—a complete gift. The first Adam caused the gates of Paradise to be closed, but at the baptism of Jesus, “the heavens were opened” as God revealed Himself in His fullness as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The open semi-circle on the upper part of the icon with a ray of light shining upon Jesus gives expression to this joyful truth.

“THE HEAVENS WERE OPENED”

When Jesus was coming out of the water, the heavens opened; and the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove descended upon Him; and the voice of the Father spoke of Him, testifying that this is His beloved Son, in whom He is well-pleased. Thus, with Christ and in Christ, the entire Holy Trinity was revealed to the world. The entire Trinity is present at the beginning of Christ’s ministry to vouch for the ministry of Jesus which now begins. He is indeed the Son of God sent by the Father and the Holy Spirit to redeem the world. No such event occurred for Mohammed or any other religious teacher. We have to accept Mohammed’s own word that the angel Gabriel spoke to him in secret and gave him the Koran seven centuries after Jesus. There were no eyewitnesses, no Theophany, no voice from heaven, to vouch for and guarantee the divine authenticity of Mohammed’s message, as with Jesus.

The Apostle John could be referring to the witness of the Trinity that occurred at the baptism of Jesus when he writes, “for there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; those three are one If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son” (1 John 5:7-9).

St. Gregory Palamas says that the expression “the heavens were opened” means that through Adam’s disobedience, the heavens were indeed closed and man lost his communion with God. Now with the complete obedience of Christ, the new Adam, the heavens are open again and man can attain communion with God. The Father’s witness to Jesus shows that He who was baptized was not an ordinary man but His “beloved Son” consubstantial with the Father. The one baptized is shown to be the Word of God “Who is ... the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person” (Heb. 1:3).

THE DOVE

The dove appears in the icon just above the head of Jesus. St. John Chrysostom asks:

But why appear in the form of a dove? Gentle is that creature, and pure. In as much as the Spirit is “a Spirit of meekness” (Gal. 5:22), he appears in this way. As well as that, this image reminds us of an ancient story. Once, when a universal wreckage had overtaken the world, and the human race was in danger of perishing, this creature appeared, to indicate deliverance from the tempest, bearing an olive branch (Gen. 8:11). The dove made known the good news of peace and goodness for the whole world. This was a type of things to come. The dove also appears, not bearing an olive branch, but pointing out to us our deliverer from all evils, and suggesting the hope for future grace. But the dove does not lead only one man (Noah) out of an ark. It now leads the whole world toward heaven. Instead of a branch of peace from an olive tree, the dove makes available the adoption of all the children of this world as children of God. —**Saint John Chrysostom**, Homily on the Gospel of Matthew, XII, 3

The dove, representing the Holy Spirit, now descends not only upon Jesus but upon every person being baptized since it is He—the Holy Spirit—who comes to sanctify and indwell the newly baptized person through the sacrament of Holy Chrismation (the sacrament of Pentecost). Thus, every Orthodox Christian is baptized not only “of water” but also “of the Spirit.” The dove, which is the Holy Spirit, now alights upon every newly baptized and Chrismated Christian.

THE END OF THE FLOOD

Vladimir Lossky elaborates further on the meaning of the dove:

The Holy Fathers of the Church explain the appearance of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove at the Lord's Baptism by an analogy with the Flood: Just as then the world was purified of its iniquities by the waters of the Flood and the dove brought an olive branch into Noah's Ark, announcing the end of the Flood and peace returned upon the earth, so too now the Holy Spirit comes down in the form of a dove to announce the remission of sins and God's mercy to the world. 'There an olive branch, here the mercy of our God,' says St. John of Damascus. [\[cii\]](#)

Fr. Sergius Bulgakov comments further on the significance of the dove:

The baptism of the Lord was, as it were, Pentecost for the Lord, the descent of the Holy Spirit upon the God-Man, anticipating the general Pentecost of the world, the sending down of the Holy Spirit upon the apostles and, in their persons, upon the entire Church.

It was very appropriate that Jesus should begin His public ministry with the anointing of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit appearing "as a dove" at the moment of Christ's baptism indicates the coming release from the flood of sin. It did not have an olive branch in its beak (as in Noah's ark) but it suggested the oil of God's mercy, who is Christ, the beloved of the Father.

DRAGONS IN THE WATER

The presence of Jesus in the waters of the Jordan sanctifies the waters, which in ancient times were considered to be a chaotic if not demonic force. Now water not only ceases to be threatening but becomes sanctified and is used for the sanctification of the world. That is why we are now baptized in water through which we take part in the death and resurrection of Christ (Col. 2:12). We often see a small human-like figure in the water. Some interpret this as a symbol of the River Jordan which had once stopped flowing when the tabernacle of the Old Testament was carried across (Josh. 3:14-17). Often a second figure in the water represents the Red Sea, which parted to allow God's people to flee Egypt (Ex. 14:22). The figures in the water are often depicted with expressions of awe on their faces before the Revelation of God (Theophany). The hymns of the Orthodox Church often compare the miracles of the Old Testament in the Jordan River and the Red Sea with the baptism of Christ.

The two figures are brought into the icon in accordance with the third verse of Psalm 114, "The sea saw and fled, the Jordan turned back." According to other interpreters, the figure on the left alludes to Elisha turning the River Jordan backward in its course making it a dry pathway. Often we see Christ standing in the water on two slabs of stone that form a cross. Beneath Him, serpents in the water raise their heads. This alludes to Psalm 74:13 which says, "Thou didst crush the heads of dragons in the water." In this case, the dragons symbolize the devil and his evil angels. The water of baptism is both a tomb and a womb. The dragons represent the evil (sin) that is drowned and destroyed in baptism. St. John of Damascus states that Christ was baptized in order to crush the heads of dragons in the water, for there was a conception in those days that the demons dwelled in water. The old Adam, along with his sins, was buried in the water. Thus, the dragons are crushed and the demons lose their power. As the priest prays during the Theophany Service:

Thou didst divide the sea by thy might; Thou didst break the heads of the dragons on the waters. Thou, our God, hast appeared on earth and dwelt among men, Thou hast sanctified the streams of Jordan, sending down from on high the most Holy Spirit, and thou hast broken the heads of the dragons hidden therein.
[\[ciii\]](#)

“LITTLE FISH”

Some icons of Theophany portray little fish swimming in the water by Christ's feet. Tertullian explains that as the primordial waters of creation begot the fish, so the baptismal water begets “little fishes” or “little Christs.” He writes in his treatise *De Baptismo*: “We are little fishes according to the ichthys (FISH), Jesus Christ, in Whom we are born, and we only live by remaining in the water” (De Baptismo I).

The Greek word for fish ἰχθύς is also an ancient Christian symbol. It is an acronym for what Christians believe about Jesus: (I)sous (X)ristos, (̃)eou, (Y)ios, (S)otir: *Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior*.

Christ descended into the waters of the Jordan to crush the heads of the dragons. He descends into the Jordan to bind the strong one (devil) in his own territory just as He descended into Sheol to do the same. This is what happens in baptism.

THE ANGELS

As in the icon of the Nativity, an expression of meekness appears on the faces of the angels present at Jesus' baptism as they marvel at their Master's meekness. Their hands are covered out of respect for the royal person of Jesus. They are holding towels emphasizing the Orthodox way of baptism by complete immersion, requiring the body to be dried after the immersion.

It is said that after the baptism, "Jesus was led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil, and that when the devil left Him, Behold, angels came and ministered to Him" (Matt. 4:1, 11). The idea of angels holding towels in this icon dates as far back as the sixth century. Their actual number varies from two to three or more angels.

THE UPPER PART OF THE ICON

The upper part of the icon shows an open circle symbolizing the open heavens which had been closed by Adam, just as he had closed the Garden of Eden with the flaming sword. This open circle expresses the presence of God who spoke at that moment, saying, “This is my beloved Son in Whom I am well pleased.” This same presence of God is depicted in several other icons by means of a hand extended in blessing. The Holy Spirit is shown descending upon Jesus in the form of a dove representing the end of the “flood” of sin. “Where sin abounded, grace superabounded” (St. Paul). The dove appears with no olive branch in its mouth as in Noah’s time but depicts the mercy of God. From that moment on, water would be an instrument of salvation. Every drop of water from that moment on would connect us with the water in which Jesus was baptized.

The icon shows John the Baptist with his head bowed as he accepts Christ’s bidding “to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt. 3:15). He has a look of awe on his face at the humility of the Lord. As he baptizes Jesus with one hand, with the other he gestures toward Him as if saying, “Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).

THE BODY OF JESUS IS IMMERSSED IN WATER

We note in the icon that the whole body of Jesus is immersed in the water. According to the hymns of the Feast, He “is covered by the waters of the Jordan.” This is to signify His death (Col. 2:12) since man cannot live long under water. Through sanctification, however, water becomes no longer an image of death but of new life. For this reason, icons of the great majority of the images of baptism in the early catacombs present the person baptized, including the Savior, as a newborn child.

Jim Forest observes correctly the cosmic change that has occurred to water since our Lord’s baptism:

In Jesus’ baptism all water has forever been blessed. In a sense the annual blessing at Theophany is not needed. In blessing what is already blessed, the Church is simply revealing the true nature and destiny of water, and therefore the sacramental nature of all creation. “By being restored through the blessing to its proper function,” wrote Father Alexander Schmemmann, ‘holy water’ is revealed as the true, full, adequate water, and matter becomes again a means of communion with and knowledge of God.”^{[\[civ\]](#)}

To the people of the ancient world, water was a symbol of life itself. It was a precondition of life. Man could not live without it.

WATER: A PRECONDITION OF LIFE

Water is absolutely essential to human life. It carries blood through the 60,000 miles of arteries, capillaries, and veins in our bodies. It is necessary for digestion. It lubricates our joints, keeps mucous membranes moist, and enables our eyes to function. It regulates our body heat, and it is essential to all plant and animal life, which are so important to human survival.

Modern science has discovered that all life on earth came out of water. In primeval times all life, including ours, was in the sea. Modern obstetrics has shown that the human embryo is nourished by the amniotic fluid in the mother's womb, and that this fluid has the same composition as sea-water. Our life comes from water. It refreshes and revives. Water removes dirt and cleans what is soiled. So it is that the most basic of all elements to human life has been selected by God to be the instrument of our spiritual rebirth. "Truly, truly, I say to you," said Jesus, "unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (John 3:5).

THE HOLY SPIRIT IS COMPARED TO WATER

St. Cyril of Jerusalem (AD 386) compared the Holy Spirit to water. He chose this image because of Christ's words, "He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, 'Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.' Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believe in him were to receive; for as yet the Spirit had not been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified" (John 7:38-39).

"Water," said St. Cyril, "comes down from heaven as rain, and although it is always the same in itself, it produces many different effects: one in the palm tree, another in the vine, and so on, throughout the whole of creation. It does not come down now as one thing, now as another, but while remaining essentially the same, it adapts itself to the nature and need of every creature that receives it." In other words, just as water helps produce different kinds of fruit on different trees and vines, i.e., pears, apples, grapes, peaches cantaloupe, etc., so the Holy Spirit as the living water nourishes and produces in our lives the fruits of "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."

In Rev. 22:1-3, we read of the river of the water of life that flows from the throne of God yielding each month twelve kinds of fruit on the trees that lined the river on either side. The leaves of the trees were for the healing of all nations. (See also Ezekiel 47:1-12). Note that the river of the water of life has its source at the very throne of God. The blessed water we receive on Epiphany is like the healing water that flows into our lives from the throne of God, nourishing our parched souls and helping us yield fruit for God's glory.

HOLY WATER: A SYMBOL OF NATURE SET FREE FROM SIN

It is Jesus—the Water of Life—who blessed the waters of the earth when He stepped into the Jordan River to be baptized. As Bishop Kallistos Ware writes:

When Christ went down into the waters, not only did He carry us down with Him and make us clean, but He also made clean the nature of the waters themselves. As the troparion of the forefeast puts it, “Christ has appeared in the Jordan to sanctify the waters.” The Feast of Theophany has thus a cosmic aspect. The fall of the angelic orders, and after it the fall of man, involved the whole universe. All God’s creation was thereby warped and disfigured: to use the symbolism of the liturgical texts, the waters were made a ‘lair of dragons.’ Christ came on earth to redeem not only man, but—through man—the entire material creation. When He entered the water, besides effecting by anticipation our rebirth in the font, He likewise effected the cleansing of the waters, their transfiguration into an organ of healing and grace. [\[cv\]](#)

WATER FROM THE BAPTISMAL POOLS

Following the baptismal services that took place on the Feast of the Epiphany in the early Church, the faithful began taking home some of the water from the baptismal pools, treasuring it for its consecrating and healing powers. St. John Chrysostom wrote about this practice: “On this occasion of the commemoration of the baptism of the Savior on which He sanctified the nature of the water, the people on leaving the church...used to take home some of the water and keep it.” (Hom. 24. De Bapt. Christ).

The custom prevailed in the East not only of consecrating water in churches on Epiphany but also of blessing a nearby river or stream in honor of Christ’s baptism. In Palestine it was the Jordan River that received this blessing in a colorful and solemn ceremony. Thousands of pilgrims would gather on its shores to step into the water after the blessing, as they renewed their baptismal vows.

KING TANTALUS

In Greek mythology, King Tantalus was punished in the underworld by being chained in a lake. Its water reached to his chin but withdrew whenever he bent down to satisfy his burning thirst. Over his head were branches laden with choice fruit, but they immediately drew back whenever he reached up to satisfy his hunger. A symbol of utter frustration, his name is immortalized in the English word “tantalize.” So, too, seeking to satisfy the inner thirst of the soul apart from Christ is tantalizing, utterly futile.

Everything in this world that we use to try to satisfy the thirst of the soul—money, lust, drugs, alcohol, possessions, fame—is like a broken cistern. It cannot hold the water that is poured into it. And the thirst only grows worse as a result. One would think that all these broken cisterns would drive us to the fountain of living waters.

But it doesn’t happen. Why? Because we allow ourselves to be satisfied with the broken cisterns. We need to pray that the Lord not allow us to be satisfied with the tantalizing things of this world that serve only to increase our thirst. “Anyone who drinks of this water will thirst again,” said Jesus.

Nothing will satisfy the burning thirst of tormented souls but to take them to the fountain of living waters, to true communion and fellowship with Christ.

NOT CISTERNS BUT ARTESIAN WELLS

Christ came to make us not cisterns but artesian wells. Cisterns cannot stand drought and rainless months, but an artesian well can endure any drought, even parched fields and empty reservoirs, because it has within its own spring that wells up with an endless source of refreshment.

Here then is the true meaning of the holy water we receive every year on Epiphany. It should remind us of Jesus, who is the water of life, who alone is able to satisfy the deepest thirst of the soul.

TEARS AS WATER

In his inspiring devotional book, *In Thy Presence*, Fr. Lev Gillet speaks of water in the form of tears:

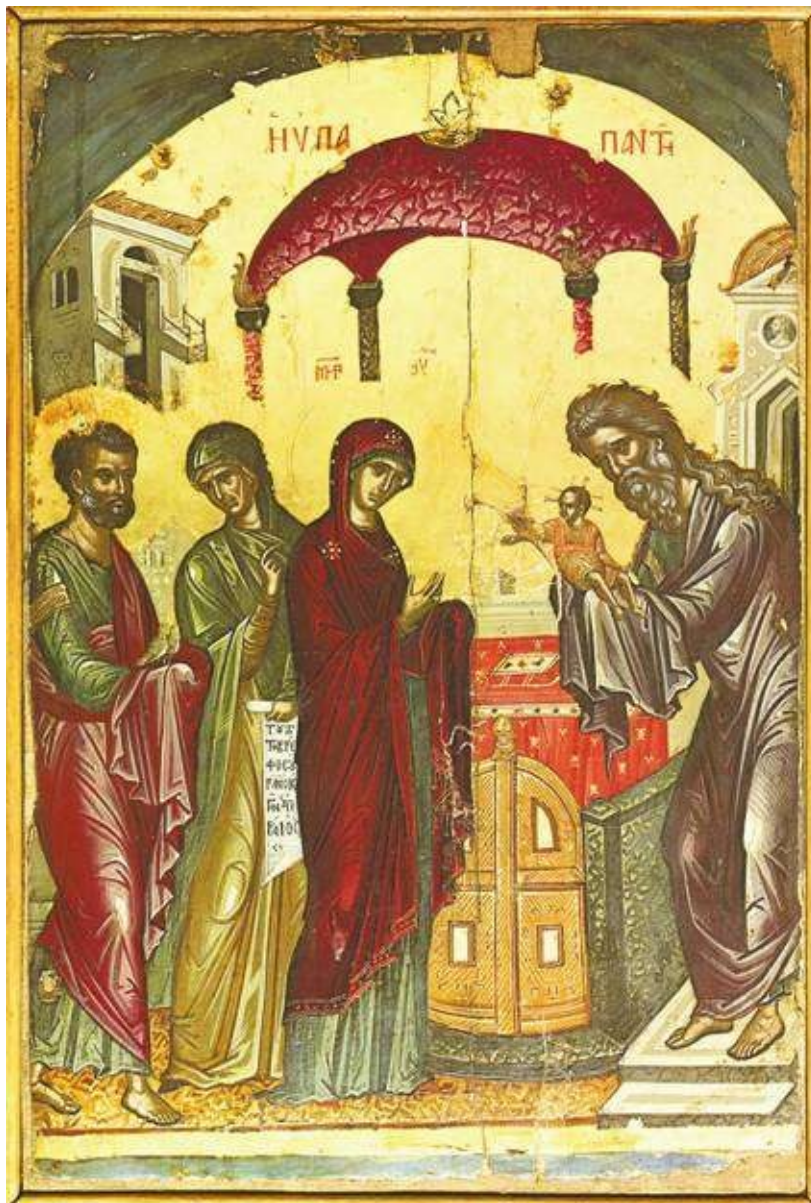
The grace of a second baptism—the baptism of repentance is also symbolized by water. But this time it is the water of tears. Thou didst abase Thyself in front of me, Lord, to wash my feet. And I, with Mary Magdalene, kneel before Thee and, in my turn, wash Thy feet. I wash them with the tears that I shed, or with the tears that I ask for. Have I any tears? Oh, give them to me! Break my heart! This baptism of burning tears, how powerful it is, for it can bring about repeatedly what the first baptism brought about once. [\[cvi\]](#)

St. Gregory of Nyssa emphasized so much the importance of tears of repentance that he said, “Even one tear of repentance is equivalent to the water of baptism, and a painful groan brings back the grace which had departed for a while.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

***THE ICON OF THE PRESENTATION OF CHRIST SPEAKS: ITS
MESSAGE (Luke 2:22-38)***

The Presentation of Christ



The Feast of the Presentation of Jesus on the fortieth day after His birth is commemorated in the East and West on February 2, exactly forty days after His birth on December 25. While the same event is celebrated in the West, it is not called the Presentation or the Meeting of the Lord in the Temple, but is known rather as the Feast of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The accent in the West is not on the meeting of the baby Jesus by Simeon and Anna in the temple(as in the East), but on the purification of the Mother of Jesus. The subject of the purification of Mary is not absent from the Feast, but it is of secondary importance in the East. No mention is made of it in the hymns of the day, which stress the purity of the virgin. The Feast of the Presentation is described only in the Gospel of Luke 2:22-39.

DID MARY NEED TO BE PURIFIED?

Mary did not need to be “purified” since the birth of her Child was supernatural. This means that her womb was indeed opened and that Christ was born from her in the manner in which all children are born. The only miracle in regards to our Lord’s birth was His virginal conception. There is no teaching of any other sort of miracle in regard to His birth. There is certainly no idea that he came forth from His mother without opening the womb as some ultra-pietistic traditions hold.

Fr. Thomas Hopko explains,

She came not because she had done anything sinful or wrong; certainly not in relation to her giving birth to the Savior. She came rather to show that she, being a mere mortal and in need of salvation along with the whole of creation, had been chosen to be the most active participant in the holiest act of God ever accomplished in the world: the incarnation as a man of God’s very own Son! To be required to participate in such a “purification” is the act of greatest joy and thanksgiving. It is also an act which brings the greatest glory and honor to the one who is purified. [\[cvii\]](#)

The act of purification on the fortieth day after birth was also commanded by God through Moses. Thus, on this day, one thinks especially about the kenosis of God in Christ, i.e., the deep self-emptying of the Son of God. The feast emphasizes the fact that on this day He who is the Giver of the Law becomes obedient to the Law:

Today He Who once gave the law to Moses on Sinai
Submits Himself to the ordinances of the law,
For our sake becoming as we are, in His compassion. —*Vespers*

St. Paul expressed it this way, “He who was rich for our sakes became poor so that by His poverty we might become rich.” The purpose of His self-emptying was that He might fill our emptiness with all His fullness.

GOD IS NOT THE AUTHOR OF SIN

While it is true that some of the prayers offered at the churching of mother and child today stress the sinfulness of the mother and ask for her forgiveness, they should never be understood to mean that the act of giving birth, or the act by which we are conceived, is sinful.

St. John Chrysostom teaches that those who claim that the sexual act of reproduction is sinful even when it takes place within the sacrament of marriage are accusing God of sin since He is the creator of the act (*On Titus, Homily 2*). For Jesus, of course, there was no need even of purification. It was rather an act of obedience to God's laws.

Vladimir Lossky writes regarding the predominance of the theme of the Meeting (*Ypapante*) of the Lord over the "purification" of Mary in this feast, as it is celebrated in the East:

"The Ancient of Days makes Himself a Child according to the flesh." "He who gave the Law to Moses on Sinai...to observe His Law has Himself brought to the temple." As in the account of St. Luke, the theme of the Purification of the Mother is almost forgotten. The central moment of the feast is the "Meeting" of the Messiah: the meeting of the Old and the New Testament. [\[cviii\]](#)

THE OLD TESTAMENT RECOGNIZES THE MESSIAH

Both Simeon and the prophetess Anna represent the Old Testament recognizing, acknowledging, and proclaiming the Christ Child as the expected Messiah. Fr. Sergius Bulgakov expands upon this truth when he writes:

The meeting took place. The Old Testament world finished its work; with the lips of Simeon it pronounced its Nunc Dimittis. But it was necessary for the Temple and the rituals of the law to preserve their former appearance until the time came for them to be abolished and to be replaced by the new veneration of God in spirit and truth. And the Mother and the Infant, when they returned to Nazareth, had to flee to Egypt in order to escape Herod's fury; and this was already the beginning of the fulfillment of Simeon's prophecy.... Let the Nunc Dimittis, the hymn of the seeing of the Lord face to face, resound in our soul too at the hour when, at the boundary of this life, it will enter the spiritual world. Let this entry into the spiritual world be our "meeting" with our Lord and His Mother, whom our believing and loving soul yearns for and awaits in this life! [\[cix\]](#)

HISTORY OF THE FEAST OF THE MEETING (YPAPANTE)

The earliest known artistic expressions (icons) of the Presentation of Christ in the temple are found on a mosaic in the Church of Santa Maria Maggiore (5th century) in Rome as well as an enameled cruciform reliquary in the Lateran Museum (6th century). The iconography of this feast was definitely established in the 9th century and remains practically unchanged since that time.

The Western nun Egeria witnessed this feast being celebrated in Jerusalem in much solemnity and with great procession. The feast was introduced in Constantinople in the 6th century under Justinian and was passed on to Rome in the 7th century. The practice of holding lighted candles during this service was introduced in Jerusalem at about AD 450 . The custom of holding lighted candles was preserved in the West: hence the feast is also called Candlemas in the West.

THE EVENT OF THE MEETING (YPAPANTE)

The events of this feast are told only in Luke 2:22-38. Christ is brought into the temple as a forty day old infant by Mary and Joseph in accordance with the requirements of the Law of Moses. There He meets His chosen people in the persons of Simeon and Anna. Simeon is described by St. Luke as “righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him.” And, “it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” (Luke 22:25-26). Luke does not identify Simeon as being a priest. Anna is described as a prophetess who in her old age “gave thanks to God, and spoke of Him to all who were looking for the redemption of Israel” (Luke 2:38).

In meeting with Simeon, Christ is welcomed as “a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for the glory of thy people Israel” (Luke 2:32).

Simeon’s prophecy is that the Child will evoke conflict and a sword will pierce the heart of Mary as she sees her Son on the Cross.

WHY SIMEON AND ANNA?

When Jesus is brought to the temple by Mary and Joseph, He meets His chosen people in the persons of Simeon and Anna. In these two persons—Simeon and Anna—the entire Old Testament cries out that the age-old prophecies about the Messiah have been fulfilled: He who had been promised; He whose coming had been foretold; He who is a “Light for revelation to the Gentiles” and the “glory” of God’s people; the Messiah has now come!

But why of all people at that time, why was it that only Simeon and Anna were able to recognize the baby Jesus as the promised Messiah? The answer is found in the Gospel: *“Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.... And there was a prophetess, Anna.... She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day”* (Luke 2:25-38).

WAITING EXPECTANTLY

Simeon and Anna, righteous and devout, people of prayer and worship, were both waiting expectantly for the “consolation of Israel”, i.e., for the coming of the Messiah. Both had searched the Scriptures; both had prayed and waited for the coming of the Messiah in fulfillment of prophecy. That is why they both recognized the Messiah in the baby Jesus under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. God has always revealed Himself to those who are prepared to receive Him; to those who are expectantly waiting for Him. If heaven is a prepared place for a prepared people, God’s revelations are also prepared revelations for people who are prepared to receive them. God speaks only to those who are eagerly listening; those who come to Him with deep humility and faith. Simeon and Anna were eager, waiting, listening, expecting, faithful, humble, and Spirit-filled. Hence, it was to them that God revealed the baby Jesus as the Messiah.

ARE WE A “WAITING” PEOPLE?

Are we today a waiting people? As time passes (and how rapidly it passes!), are we redeeming the time by prayerfully waiting, planning, and preparing for the Coming of Jesus? He is coming! But how many of us are waiting for Him expectantly? How many of us are waiting eagerly for His return? How many of us are preparing for His return? Simeon and Anna were! Thus, they alone of all people at that time recognized the baby Jesus when He was brought to the temple, and they acknowledged and proclaimed Him as the Messiah.

THE HOLY SPIRIT WAS UPON HIM

“*The Holy Spirit was upon Simeon*” (Luke 2:25). It was the Holy Spirit who inspired Simeon to know that he would not die before he had seen the Messiah. It was the Holy Spirit who inspired him to recognize the Messiah in the baby Jesus. It was the Holy Spirit who inspired him to predict the suffering His mother would endure when she would see Him nailed to the Cross. It was the Holy Spirit who placed the beautiful words of the *Nunc Dimittis* on Simeon’s lips.

For the Holy Spirit to rest upon a person is the highest experience God can bestow upon anyone. The Holy Spirit can come to rest upon us today through prayer. We, too, can become like Simeon and Anna. Our eyes can be opened to see God’s salvation personally in Jesus. We can be empowered and enlightened to proclaim God’s salvation to the world. May we pray each day for the Holy Spirit to fill the weak clay vessel of this body and turn it into a true temple of God’s presence.

“NOW I’VE SEEN EVERYTHING”

When Simeon took the baby Jesus in his arms, he uttered the beautiful *Nunc Dimittis* prayer (Luke 2:29-32). Simeon had lived many years. He had seen and enjoyed many things, but nothing had completely satisfied him. Now he stood at the crest of his years as he looked at the baby Jesus in Mary’s arms. Here was the great experience which life had promised and had not, until that moment, given. Taking Jesus into his arms, he said, “Lord, now I’ve seen everything! Now I can die contented!.... For I have seen the Savior...!” All who have met the Savior and seen Him not through someone else’s eyes but through their own eyes of faith are ready to live and ready to die, for their eyes have beheld the Savior of the world.

THE WHOLE POINT OF LIFE

For us, as for Simeon, is this not the whole point of life? Is this not why we were brought into the world: to see Jesus, to meet Him, to know Him personally as our Savior, to present ourselves to Him as a living sacrifice; to take Him into our arms and love Him? God had this in mind when He made us. He will not let us be satisfied with anything less than the salvation given us in Christ Jesus.

Simeon met Jesus! So can we! Faith is not something we inherit from our family. Faith comes from a personal meeting or encounter with Jesus. We can meet Him in prayer each day. We meet Him in the Bible. We meet Him in every liturgy in the Eucharist. We meet Him in the face of every needy person. Simeon held Jesus in his arms. We can picture Jesus holding children in His arms, but here is something totally different: Simeon holds Jesus in his arms! Are we not invited to do the same? Don't we hold Jesus in our mind when we read His precious words in the Gospels and when we pray to Him? Do not we hold Him in our hearts when we receive His precious body and blood in the Eucharist? When this happens, we too can say with Simeon, "Lord, now I've seen everything! Now I can live and die contented! For I have seen the Savior!"

One of the post-Communion thanksgiving prayers invites us to pray after receiving Jesus in the Eucharist the beautiful *Nunc Dimittis* prayer of Simeon. How very appropriate it is to pray this inspiring prayer at that moment. For, having just received the Savior not into our arms but into our hearts, we break out in praise and thanksgiving as we pray:

Lord, now let your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;
For my eyes have seen Your salvation
Which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
A light for the revelation to the Gentiles,
And for glory to Your people Israel (Luke 2:29-32).

Thus every Christian is called to be not only a *cradle* Christian but also a *credo* Christian, i.e., not only a Christian born and baptized in the faith but also a Christian by personal faith. *Credo* is Latin for "I believe."

THE DEEPER MEANING OF SIMEON'S HYMN

Simeon says in this triumphal hymn that whereas in the Old Testament the prophets were able to witness only the back of God, he now sees God face to face in the person of the infant Jesus. He now sees the real light which dispels the darkness of the world's delusion and ignorance.

The fact that no sooner had Simeon seen the Incarnate Word of God than he sought release through death is interpreted by sacred tradition as the great joy over what he was to do next. According to tradition, He desired to go to Hades to share the good news of the Messiah's arrival with those in Hades, all the righteous of the Old Testament, and proclaim to them that the Messiah would soon come to Hades to release them.

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann imagines himself saying to Jesus much the same as Simeon did:

Now, You may let me depart in peace, for I have seen, I have held in my arms, I have embraced the very meaning of life.... Let me now depart. I have seen the light which permeates the world. I have seen the Child, who brings the world so much divine love and who gives himself to me. Nothing is feared, nothing is unknown, all is now peace, thanksgiving and love. This is what the Meeting of the Lord brings. It celebrates the soul meeting Love, meeting the One who gave me life and gave me strength to transfigure it into anticipation. [\[cx\]](#)

A PAIR OF TURTLE DOVES

St. Luke tells us that as Mary and Joseph presented Jesus to the Lord, they made an offering—a sacrifice—“according to what is said in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.’” This was the traditional thanksgiving offering to God of the poor for the gift of the male child. Normally, the gift was an unblemished lamb, but Joseph and Mary were so poor that all they could afford was two turtle doves. Even that was probably a strain on their budget, but they knew that worship required something of them.

Worship—if it is godly, holy, life-changing, and Christ-like—always requires something of us. It requires much more than the giving of our money, as important as that is. It requires the surrender of our total selves. It requires confession. It requires repentance. It requires a broken and contrite spirit. It requires forsaking our sins. It requires restitution. It requires taking up the cross and following Jesus. It requires sacrifice. Worship is not worship without the “two turtle doves,” without sacrifice.

St. Gregory the Theologian reminds us that the poverty of Jesus was due

to the fact that, though He was rich, He became poor for us through His incarnation, that we might become rich with His divinity through theosis.

ISAIAH'S VISION

The hymnody of this Feast is extremely rich typologically. It draws upon the rich tradition of the Old Testament. For example, the story of Isaiah's vision of the throne of God is read during the service (Isaiah 6:6-7).

John Baggley explains the meaning of this reading as it is applied typologically to the Feast:

This text comes to be seen in the light of the Incarnation as a foreshadowing of the Incarnation itself: the burning coal which takes away guilt and brings forgiveness is a symbol of the Incarnate Son, and the tongs with which the seraph brings the coal from the heavenly altar to the prophet are a symbol of the Virgin through whom the Incarnation takes place. In the context of the Meeting of the Lord, the typological interpretation is apt: the seraph with the tongs and the coal of fire are effective in purifying the prophet Isaiah and preparing him for his ministry as a prophet, and so much more does the approach of the Virgin Mother bearing in her arms the Incarnate fire of divinity prepare Simeon for this departure to proclaim to Adam and Eve (in Hades) the good news of the Incarnation and the mystery of grace. [\[cxi\]](#)

Isaiah's vision is linked to the Incarnation in the interpretive tradition of the Church. As a troparion (hymn) of the Magnificat of the Feast says: "Mary, thou art the Mystic Tongs, who has conceived in thy womb Christ the live Coal." Just as the prophet Isaiah received the live coal and was not burned but purified becoming a prophet, so also the righteous Simeon received the live coal from the Theotokos and was not burned but purified, according to the saying, "Behold, He has touched your lips and pardons your transgressions and purifies your sins." This saying is also a prayer that every Orthodox priest prays on receiving the Holy Eucharist.

WE HAVE SEEN FAR MORE THAN SIMEON DID

We today have seen far more than Simeon ever saw. The Lord has allowed us to see far, far more than Simeon thought he had seen when he said, “Mine eyes have seen thy salvation...” for Simeon had not seen all the miracles Jesus performed, especially His resurrection. He had not seen all the martyrs and confessors of the Church. We today who have seen far more should have a greater faith than Simeon ever had. In 1 Peter 1:3-9 St. Peter describes some of the blessings Simeon never witnessed.

SIMEON, “THE HOST OF GOD”

Simeon is frequently called *Theodochos* or Host of God in the Eastern Church. This is because of the great importance that is placed on his taking the Christ child from Mary’s arms and offering Him to God. Extolled as the receiver of God, he is held up before us as a sacred example of how we need to receive Christ, i.e., meet Him not only communally as members of His body but also personally. Do we need to be reminded that everyone who receives Christ in the Eucharist is a *Theodochos*? Does not this make Simeon a symbol for every true Christian?

The word “meet” here reminds us that each one of us, inspired by the same Holy Spirit as Simeon was, must have his or her own personal “meeting” with Jesus within the context of the Body of Christ, the Church. If our faith relationship with Jesus is to become real and come alive, we must *meet* Jesus as Simeon and Anna did on this day. For example, I love to meet with Jesus personally each morning in prayer and in the reading of His word. Only then—when we meet Jesus and see with our own eyes the salvation of God—only then can we “depart in peace.” Only then will life have meaning. Only then can we experience true fulfillment.

THE FORTY-DAY BLESSING OF MOTHER AND CHILD

Do you remember the first time you went to church? I don't, but I have been told about it many times. I went to church for the first time in my mother's arms, accompanied by my father, when I was presented to the Lord forty days after my birth.

We can be sure that Jesus, too, was told often of His 40-day blessing. He was only forty days old, and Luke tells us He was taken to the temple by Mary and Joseph "after their purification had been completed in accordance with the law of Moses."

Common to both East and West, this is how the beautiful rite of the "Churching of the Mother and Child on the Fortieth Day After Birth" originated. How wonderful for Christian parents to come to church with their newborn child on the fortieth day to kneel in God's presence and give thanks as the priest takes the child before the altar to dedicate it to the Lord even as Jesus was.

Jesus was brought to the temple exactly forty days after His birth so His parents could present Him to the Lord. Jesus was the firstborn son of Mary, and as such was considered to belong to God in a very special way.

Every child belongs to God. Children are merely loaned to us by God. They are given to us so that we may "present" them to the Lord. Our chief purpose as parents is to bring our children to Christ, to "present" them to Him, to help them to grow to know God in Christ in a very personal and real way. This can be done only by Mom and Dad at home as they live out their Christian faith 24 hours a day. It cannot be done by the church or the Sunday school. It is a total cop-out on the part of parents to depend on the church alone for the religious education of their children. The church merely tries to supplement what is being done in the home. What can one hour a week in church do in comparison to the 168 hours each week children spend at home? If children do not learn to pray at home, they will never learn to pray anywhere else. If they do not learn to enjoy reading God's word at home, they will never learn it anywhere else. Jesus was presented to God forty days after birth. We were presented to God forty days after our birth. Our chief purpose is to offer ourselves and our children to God daily in surrender, commitment, prayer, and service (Rom. 12:1).

UNFORTUNATE SUPERSTITIONS

It is unfortunate that many superstitions have grown up around this beautiful custom, i.e., that it is unlucky for a woman to leave her home after childbirth until she comes to church for this ceremony; or that a woman is considered “unclean” for forty days after childbirth; or that she is not supposed to go to church until the time of her churching ceremony; or that she is not supposed to receive the Eucharist until after this ceremony, *etc.* How unfortunate that this beautiful ceremony of thanksgiving to God for a new birth has to be marred and distorted by so much superstition!

Some of these customs may have been valid in the Old Testament where, for example, a woman was considered to be unclean after childbirth, but not in the New Testament. Christ, who is the truth, has set us free from superstition. How wonderful for a mother to come to church on the fortieth day with her husband to kneel in God’s presence and give thanks as the priest takes the child toward the altar to give thanks.

“SAVED THROUGH CHILDBIRTH”

The Bible has a remarkable phrase, indicating that “through childbirth, a woman shall be saved” (1 Tim. 2:15). Whatever else this verse may mean, it points to a most important role in the life of the Church for women. The work of procreation is only begun with the child’s birth. Procreation does not end with childbirth. It begins. Parents are continually creating life; continually creating personality in their children with the kind of family faith atmosphere they provide. Is there any task more sacred or more exalted than this? Parents have the awesome privilege of being able to “save” the world through this kind of childbirth, rearing, and nurturing.

The first icon of God the child sees is the face of mother and father. One person said, “Initially my parents and family were the church. They were the ones who conveyed faith to me, who nourished me not only physically but spiritually as well.” Could this be why St. Chrysostom called marriage “the mysterious icon of the Church”? And St. Paul called the home “the church in your house”? And could this be why Clement of Alexandria suggested that the two or three gathered in Christ’s name among whom Christ is present (see Matt. 18:20) are “husband, wife and child”? Augustine had no doubt about this when he wrote of his mother, Monica, “who brought me to birth both in her body so that I was born into the light of time, and in her heart so that I was born in the light of eternity.”

Children are not to be brought up in isolation. They need to be welcomed, nourished, educated, and loved. The Service of the Churching of Mother and Child opens the door to the fulfillment of this sacred task.

THE ICON OF THE FEAST

The Festal icon for this feast depicts the *Ypapante*, the Meeting of the Old and the New Testaments. Simeon and Anna, prophets of the Old Testament, meet the Messiah of the New Testament and proclaim Him as such.

The scene of the “Meeting” takes place in the temple, in front of the altar, which is represented iconographically with a canopy, which is a simple way of representing a temple. On the left hand side of the altar stands the Mother of God holding out her two hands covered with a maphorion in a gesture of offering. She has just handed her Son to Simeon, who according to Scripture is not a priest. Next to the Mother of God stands St. Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, “a widow of about four score and four years,” who kept waiting in the temple “worshipping with prayer and fasting,” expecting with great desire to see the Messiah. Next to Anna stands Joseph carrying in the folds of his garment the offering of poor parents (Lev. 12:8), two turtle doves or two young pigeons.

St. Simeon, the central figure of the icon, is called both “the Host of God” (*theodochos*) and “He who has seen God” (*theoptis*). For to Moses God appeared enveloped in darkness, while Simeon carried in his arms the eternal incarnate Word.

The Child in the icon is clothed, not naked. The Theotokos is shown youthful. All the five figures in the icon are depicted with halos. St. Anna holds a scroll on which are written the words, “This Child made heaven and earth.” Simeon’s facial expression conveys the words which he spoke, “Lord, now let your servant depart in peace....”

The dismissal hymn of the feast is much simpler than either the icon or the Gospel as it speaks only of the three principal figures: Christ, the Theotokos, and Simeon:

Rejoice, thou who art full of grace, O Virgin Theotokos, for from thee hath risen the sun of Righteousness, Christ our God, illuminating those in darkness. Rejoice thou also, O righteous Elder, as thou receives in thine arms, the Redeemer of our souls, Who also granteth unto us the Resurrection.

The *megalynarion*, or magnificat, for the feast mentions only the three main personages and the temple.

Today the most pure Mariam presenteth in the temple the Creator as a babe, Whom, receiving in his arms, the Elder declareth to be God, even though He took upon Himself flesh.

In keeping with ancient tradition, Simeon's hands are covered out of respect for the royal majesty of Jesus. Mary and Joseph are surprised by the occurrence (Luke 2:33), because Simeon also prophesied that the appearance of Christ will bring about many disagreements, and that His Mother will suffer greatly in her soul, as though pierced by a sword (Luke 2:34-35). The prophetess Anna was one of the first to spread the news about Jesus among the people who were awaiting the Savior (Luke 2:38). Simeon is not depicted as a priest, nor is he dressed like one, but he is placed on a step near the altar. Having received the child in his arms, he bows respectfully over the child. In the words of John Baggley, "the Live Coal of the Incarnate Godhead has been brought into the Temple by the Theotokos in fulfillment of prophecy, and has been welcomed with joy in the arms of Simeon."

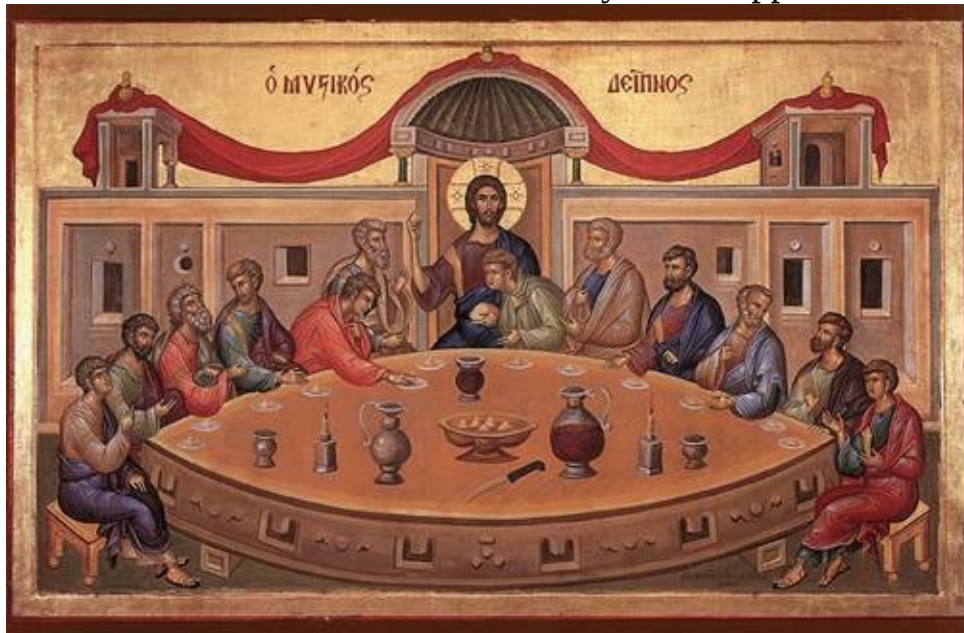
Receive Him, O Simeon, Whom Moses on Mount Sinai beheld in the darkness as the Giver of the Law. Receive Him as a babe now obeying the Law. For He it is of Whom the Law and the Prophets have spoken, incarnate for our sake and saving mankind. Come let us adore Him!

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

THE ICON OF THE MYSTICAL SUPPER SPEAKS: ITS MESSAGE

All the Holy Communion in the Church are a single and eternal Supper, that of Christ in the Upper Room. The divine act that took place at a precise moment in history is the same that is always present in the sacrament. It has the power to open time and occupy the heart of every moment and become its true content. —
Paul Evdokimov

The Mystical Supper



(1 Cor. 11: 23-32; Matthew 26:1-26; John 13:3-17; Matthew 26:21-39; Luke 22:43-44; Matthew 26:40-75, 27; John 6:48-58).

The icon of the Mystical Supper is set out for veneration every Holy Thursday, which is the day on which our Lord instituted the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. The Mystical Supper is such a vital part of Orthodox worship and life that it has a permanent location in the center of the iconostasis just above the Royal Doors. It is under these doors that Orthodox Christians receive the body and blood of our Lord in a very personal way. How personal? As the priest administers the consecrated bread and wine to each communicant, he says,

The servant (handmaiden) of God, (name), receives the precious and holy Body and Blood of our Lord and God and Savior Jesus Christ, unto the remission of sins and unto life everlasting.

Hearing the priest saying my name as I received Communion always personalized God's love for me. By instituting the Holy Eucharist, Jesus fulfilled His prophesy that He is the "Bread of Life" for the entire world. As Paul Evdokimov said, "Every celebration of the Eucharist reproduces the Holy Supper."

“GIVE US THIS BREAD ALWAYS”

In the sixth chapter of John’s Gospel, Jesus said to His disciples: “Truly, truly, I say to you, it was not Moses who gave you the bread from heaven; my Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven, and gives life to the world.... I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and they died. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that a man may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven, if anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:32-33; 48-51).

The disciples then turned to Jesus and said, “Lord, give us this bread always” (John 6:34).

Jesus complied with their request. He gave us the Bread of Life, Himself, in the sacrament of the Eucharist: “For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him” (John 6:55-56).

WHAT IS HOLY COMMUNION?

The Eucharist is a communal as well as a personal encounter with the living Christ. This is where we meet Him and invite Him into our soul.

The Eucharist is the nuptial encounter of the soul with her Lord. It is a marriage union between Christ and the soul. In the words of Cyril of Jerusalem: "Christ has given to the children of the bridal chamber the enjoyment of His body and His blood." Another Church father, Theodoret, writes, "In eating the elements of the Bridegroom and drinking His blood, we accomplish a marriage union." The Eucharist, then, becomes the marriage relationship through which the bridegroom, Christ, espouses the Church as His bride, thus truly transforming a human community into the Church of God, the body of Christ.

St. Ambrose says that when the body of Christ is placed on the lips of the believer, it is truly a kiss given by Christ to the soul, the expression of the union of love between the believer and his Lord. "By the Bread of Life we become members of Christ much more perfectly than by any other rite" (St. Nicholas Cabasilas).

The Eucharist is the *Eschaton*, the *Omega*, breaking into history. It is the inaugurated kingdom of God being made manifest. The Eucharist is where heaven and earth meet in a kiss of love. The Eucharist is the Holy One, unapproachable in glory, bending down to touch us in love. It is the mystery of both the beyondness and the nearness of God coming alive for us. The Eucharist is participating in the new life of Christ by partaking of the precious body and blood of our Lord.

Christianity is more than dogma or teaching. It is Christ Himself living in us. It is because of the Eucharist that Jesus could say to us, "Behold, I am with you always..." (Matt. 28:20).

DIVINE BLOOD TRANSFU/SION

The Eucharist is a divine blood transfusion. God transfuses His own precious, sacred, royal, and life-giving blood into our blood stream to give us new life, new strength, and royal dignity. The Old Testament speaks of blood as life (Gen. 2:7; Lev. 17:11,14). In the New Testament, the Eucharist becomes the way by which we receive this new life: the very life of God through the precious body and blood of His Son.

Someone said once, "I had been taught in Sunday School that 'God is everywhere.' But that was one of the things that made me angry. Everywhere was too vague. I wanted to find Him somewhere."

GOD IS SOMEWHERE IN SPECIFIC

The God who is present everywhere is to be found somewhere in specific. “This *is* my body.... This *is* my blood.” When Jesus spoke these words He meant exactly what He said. The bread and the wine that are received in the Eucharist are literally His body and blood. They are not merely symbols. For Jesus Himself said, “For my flesh *is* food indeed, and my blood *is* drink indeed” (John 6:55). St. John Chrysostom writes, “What is in the chalice is the same as that which flowed from Christ’s side. What is the bread? Christ’s body.” “... [T]he bread which I shall give for the life of the world is *my flesh*,” said Jesus (John 6:51).

MORE THAN A SYMBOL

The Church fathers testify that Jesus meant what He said when He uttered the words, “This is my body...” The *Didache*, one of the earliest Christian documents, declares that the bread and wine are “holy”; they are spiritual food and drink communicating immortal life. St. Ignatius writes that “the Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ, Who suffered for our sins and Whom the Father in His goodness raised.” He calls the Eucharist a medicine that procures immortality (*farmakon athanasias*), an antidote against the poison of death which enables us to live in the Lord forever.

For the first thousand years of Christianity, when the Church was visibly one and undivided, the gifts of the Eucharist were received as the real body and blood of Christ. The entire Church at that time confessed this belief. There was never a statement that these gifts merely symbolized the Body and Blood of Jesus. Critics came later. They objected that Jesus also compared Himself to a door. “I am the door” (John 10:7). He certainly did not mean that He was a seven-foot wooden plank. But the flaw in that argument is obvious: at no time has the Church believed that Jesus was a literal door. But she has always believed that the consecrated gifts of bread and wine are truly the body and blood of Jesus. This was true in the beginning and continues to be true today. “Christ is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.”

Thus, when Orthodox Christians receive the Eucharist, we receive the very body and blood of Jesus, the same body that walked on the Sea of Galilee and calmed the storm; the same body that placed its hand on the blind and the lame and healed them; the same body that was crucified on Calvary for our sins; the same body that ascended into heaven and now sits at the right of the Father; the same body that will one day come again to judge the living and the dead.

THE LAST SUPPER—YOU ARE THERE!

Meditating on the Last Supper, some might say to themselves: Would that I were there with the apostles in the presence of the Master that evening in the Upper Room! How I wish I'd have heard from His lips the words, "This is my body.... This is my blood.... Take...eat...drink...." Yet through the Eucharist *we are there!* Gaze for a moment at the icon of the Mystical Supper. The same Master is present. The same bread. The same cup. The same sacrifice. The same Upper Room. The same Last Supper. The only difference is that instead of the apostles we are the ones present with Jesus. In the words of Nicolai Gogol, the Eucharist is "the eternal repetition of the great act of love performed on Calvary."

THE IMPORTANCE OF HOLY COMMUNION

The great importance and necessity of Holy Communion for our salvation is witnessed to in the words of Jesus: “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:53-54). There is nothing optional about Communion. It is absolutely necessary for salvation, together with faith, repentance, confession, and baptism.

St. Isaac the Syrian writes:

Blessed is he that has eaten of the Bread of love which is Jesus. While still in this world, he breathes the air of the resurrection, in which the righteous will delight after they rise from the dead.

Writing on the importance of the Eucharist, St. Nicholas Cabasilas says,

It is the completion of all the sacraments and not simply one of them.... All human striving reaches here its ultimate goal. For in this sacrament we attain God Himself, and God Himself is made one with us in the most perfect of all unions.... This is the final mystery: beyond this it is not possible to go, nor can anything be added to it.

THE SACRAMENT OF SACRAMENTS

The Eucharist is not just one sacrament among many, but the foundation and fulfillment of them all. To use the words of Paul Evdokimov it is, “the sacrament of sacraments” and “the mystery of mysteries.” Just as nothing can live without the sun, so nothing can live spiritually without the Christ who comes to us in the Eucharist. It is our greatest way of being united to Christ and to one another in the Church, our greatest way to grow in the life of Christ. Through the Eucharist we are already beginning the life of heaven. By taking part in it frequently, we are gradually transformed into Christ.

Speaking of the importance of Holy Communion in her ministry to the poor and dying of India, Mother Teresa said, “We cannot do without Holy Communion every day. That would mean being without Christ.”

“BROKEN” BODY AND “SHED” BLOOD

The broken bread in the Eucharist signifies the body of Jesus that was “broken” for our salvation; the poured wine symbolizes the precious blood that was “shed” for our redemption.

Bread and wine are two substances that have to be completely broken before they can become what they are. Wheat has to be broken utterly and crushed under the Golgotha of a mill before it can become bread. Grapes must also be completely broken and subjected to the Gethsemane of a wine press before they can become wine. They symbolize the struggle of our own salvation since we too must die to ourselves before we can live for Christ.

Since Holy Communion affects a union with Christ and with one another, it means that I who eat the bread of life must become broken bread to the hungry lives of those about me. I who live by the sacrifice of my Lord Jesus must offer up my life “broken” on the altar of my neighbor’s need.

Thus, Holy Communion is an occasion for brokenness. We must come to it with a broken spirit. In the words of David: “The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, thou wilt not despise” (Psalm 51:17). Christ cannot come into a heart unless it is broken by humility, repentance, and love.

ETERNAL LIFE NOW

We need not wait for the final coming of Jesus to receive this eternal life. It is ours now.

St. John of Damascus writes, “To those who partake of it worthily and with faith, Holy Communion is for the remission of sins, and life eternal, and the preservation of soul and body.”

St. Isidore says, “Communion means partaking of the Divine Mysteries, because it gives us union with Christ and makes us participants in His kingdom.”

And St. Nilus: “It is impossible for a believer to be saved, to receive remission of sins and be admitted to the kingdom of heaven, unless in fear, faith and love he receives Communion of the pure Mysteries of the Body and Blood of Christ.”

St. John of the Ladder writes, “If a body coming into contact with another body undergoes a change under its influence, how can a man not change if he touches the Body of God with pure hands?”

The following prayer that we read after receiving the Eucharist speaks of the powerful change that takes place when we touch the body of God:

“...[L]et these gifts be for us the healing of soul and body, the repelling of every adversary, the illumining of the eyes of my heart, the peace of my spiritual powers, a faith unashamed, a love unfringed, the fulfilling of wisdom, the observing of Thy commandments, the receiving of the Divine grace, and the attaining of Thy kingdom.... Consume me not, O my Creator, but instead enter into my members, my veins, my heart...may every evil thing, every carnal passion flee from me as from fire as I become Thy tabernacle through Communion....”

TRUE KOINONIA

Thus, the Lord's Supper is a true koinonia or fellowship. It is the family meal of God's people. Being reconciled to God, we are also reconciled to our fellow humans, and we can now gather together with them in a new fellowship of forgiveness and love.

Describing this true koinonia of Christians, Fr. Florovsky has written:

Christians are united not only among themselves, but first of all they are one—in Christ, and only this communion with Christ makes the communion of men first possible—in Him. [\[cxii\]](#)

True fellowship of equality and oneness is established by the Eucharist. "Drink ye *all* of it" There is not one cup for the king and another for the pauper. All are to receive of the same cup.

There is a touching story that illustrates the equality of this true koinonia before Christ:

One Sunday, just after the close of the Civil War, in one of the most aristocratic Episcopal churches in Richmond, the rector invited the congregation to come forward to partake of the Eucharist. An aged black man, newly liberated, rose hesitatingly from his seat in the rear of the church and, coming forward, humbly knelt at the altar rail. A gasp went up from the congregation. Bitter in their prejudice, to the last person they held back from an association such as this, even in so sacred an act.

Then a white-haired gentleman looked up from his meditations and took in the situation at a glance. Quietly leaving his place, he went down on his knees beside the black man. They received the Eucharist together. The man was General Robert E. Lee, the commanding general of the defeated Confederate Army.

The Lord's Supper is an act of koinonia, true fellowship and oneness not only with Christ but also with one another. We truly become one body whose

head is Christ. When there is one body, each member suffers when the others suffer. We leave the Eucharist with an awakened sense of love and sensitivity to the pain and poverty of our brethren.

The true koinonia of the Eucharist is expressed on the paten where the large square piece of bread that is consecrated to become the body of Christ (the host) is surrounded by smaller pieces that are cut from the same *prosfora*, or loaf, representing the Mother of God, the angels, the saints, the departed, and the members of the local parish who are being remembered in prayer. Thus, it is the entire Church, that in heaven and that on earth, that is on the paten with Christ in a true koinonia of oneness. “It is in the Eucharist that Christ is with us to the end of the world” (Paul Evdokimov).

If, as we communicate with Christ, we become one with all His members, then how can we keep approaching the cup with no true unity and love among us? Are we not the single body of Christ? What evidence do we offer of this unity? It is easy for many of us to swallow God in the Eucharist. What we find hard to swallow is our neighbor. That would give many of us indigestion. Yet how can there be a true koinonia without forgiveness and love? Jesus said it plainly, “If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

WE BECOME THE BODY OF CHRIST

The last effect of the Eucharist that we shall discuss is that it makes us the body of Christ. It is the Eucharist that makes each one of us an extension of Christ and the presence of Christ on earth today. We not only receive the body of Christ, but, having received, we go out into the world to be the body of Christ. This is called the “liturgy after the liturgy.”

It is the Eucharist which makes the Church the body of Christ. At the epiclesis prayer, both the people and the gifts of bread and wine are consecrated, each in their own way, to become the body of Christ. Thus, we become the body of Christ through the Eucharist. It establishes us as the Church, as the royal priesthood, a chosen race, a holy nation, God’s own people (1 Peter 2:9).

We go out into the world to be the eyes, the ears, the mouth, the hands, the feet of Christ. The Eucharist is given to us not only that we may *do* something but also that we may *be* someone: other Christs in the world today! Fr. Schmemmann used to call every Christian a “Eucharistic being.” After having just received the Eucharist, St. Symeon the New Theologian looked at the members of his body and, thinking of the blood of Jesus flowing through them, said:

We become members of Christ—and Christ becomes our members, Christ becomes my hand, Christ, my miserable feet; I wave my hand, and my hand is the whole Christ....

Thus, the Eucharist transforms us into members of Christ, uniting us with all those who receive Him, to reveal the Church as a fellowship (koinonia) of love. One loaf, one body.

A JOYOUS WEDDING FEAST

Jesus often compared the kingdom of God to a wedding feast. “The kingdom of heaven is like a king who made a marriage feast for his son” (Matt. 22:2). This shows that Jesus thought of the kingdom in terms of unspeakable joy. At the heart of this Eucharistic joy is the Lord’s Supper, which is to culminate in the banquet of heaven.

The Eucharist is such a wedding banquet where the bridegroom, Christ, comes to wed Himself to each one of us. We go to the banquet as guests but also as servants. We go with joy. We go with the greatest wedding gift of all: the gift of our self in total surrender to His will. We go dressed in the Master’s wedding garments of forgiveness and grace. We go as the bride to her husband bringing our virginity in terms of our life-long commitment to Him and only to Him. Thus divine love and human love are consummated. Thus occurs the wedding of our humanity with His divinity. He lives in us and we in Him. We become, in fact, the people of God (*Laos tou Theou*).

“Christ is in our Midst”

The early Christians were filled with joy when they partook of the Eucharistic meal. “And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God...” (Acts 2:46). For them the celestial supper had already begun; the kingdom of God was at hand. In the breaking of the bread they were continuing that personal encounter with the risen Christ, which the apostles had experienced. During the liturgy the celebrant priest says, “Christ is in our midst.” And the assisting priest responds, after receiving the kiss of peace: “He is with us and will forever be!” The joy of the presence of the risen Christ in our midst—this is what makes every Eucharist a joyous wedding feast. It is this joy that finds expression in one of the last hymns of the liturgy:

We have seen the true light;
We have received the Holy Spirit;
We have found the true faith.
Let us worship the inseparable Trinity, For it has redeemed us.

Joy Recaptured

The note of joy and triumph finds expression in the very word “Eucharist” which means simply “thanksgiving.” Like the Passover, the Last Supper is a feast—a feast of liberation. The cost was great: the broken body and the shed blood of Jesus. But the sacrifice was not in vain. So we rejoice at the victory won. We give praise and thanks to the victor—but not as to a hero who perished in the moment of victory. We give thanks for His precious death—aware also of His mighty Resurrection and glorious Ascension. Thus the solemnity of the Eucharist is not gloom or sadness but overwhelming and abiding joy! Alfred Noyes, the poet, wrote of his father: “Anyone who doubts the Christian faith should see my father’s face when he returns from...Communion.”

ESCHATOLOGICAL

The Eucharist is not only a making present again of the Last Supper; it is also an anticipation of the eschatological feast when we shall all sit down to sup with our Lord in heaven. The Supper is to be celebrated during the time between the two comings, but it points beyond itself to the greater meal, the messianic banquet, when the kingdom will be fulfilled and God's people will gather with Him in heaven. Jesus referred to this when He said, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice and opens the door, *I will come in to him, and sup with him, and he with me*" (Rev. 3:20). This statement of Jesus is clearly eschatological. It refers to the messianic banquet.

This means that we gather at the table not only with a backward look at the first coming, but also with a forward look to the Second Coming. The Supper is a foretaste and an anticipation of that banquet which is yet to be. Thus we partake of the Eucharist not only with faith and love but also in joyful hope. In the words of St. Isaac the Syrian (seventh century):

Whoever eats this bread shall not taste death in eternity. Blessed is he that has eaten from the bread of love which is Jesus.... Even in this life he smells the air of the resurrection, which the righteous will breathe after their rising from the dead.

ARE WE WORTHY?

Are we ever worthy to receive the Eucharist? Many people abstain from receiving Communion because of a sense of deep unworthiness. Much needs to be said concerning this feeling of unworthiness which prevents so many from coming to the only one who can make us worthy. Noticing a woman who was plainly hesitating to take the sacrament, a saintly Christian said to her, “Take it, woman. Take it. It’s for sinners, for forgiven sinners. It’s for us, for you and me.”

If Communion is not for sinners, then why immediately before receiving the Eucharist, does the Church call on us to pray these words: “I believe, Lord, and confess that You are truly the Christ, the Son of the Living God, who came into the world to save *sinners of whom I am the foremost...*”? The early Church fathers never suggested that we not partake of Communion often because of personal unworthiness. To the contrary, one of the most ancient Christian documents, the *Didache*, says, “If anyone is holy, let him come; if he is not, let him repent (and come).”

We need to realize that no one is ever worthy to receive God within one’s soul. It is not a matter of our worthiness but of God’s grace. Communion is never a reward for holy living but always the gift of God’s grace no matter how much we may have prepared. May we keep our sense of unworthiness so that it may keep leading us to the only one who can make us worthy. The sense of unworthiness is just the right attitude with which to approach Communion, for it helps us accept the Eucharist as a completely free gift of God’s supreme grace. An exaggerated sense of unworthiness needs to give way to humble gratitude for God’s grace, which accepts especially the unworthy to make them worthy. Is not the Eucharist Matthew’s banquet all over again? To the horror of the “good” people, Jesus eats and drinks with sinners!

A CALL TO REPENTANCE, NOT PERFECTION

Is not the Eucharist also the great sacrament of absolution and forgiveness? Does not the priest say as we approach the cup that we are receiving it “*for the forgiveness of sins* and unto life everlasting”? Did not Jesus come to save sinners? Was not His body broken and His blood shed for the remission of the sins of the whole world? Though there should always be a penitential preparation for Holy Communion, we must always remember that Communion is not for the good and the worthy but for the unworthy and sinners. When St. Paul says, “Let a man examine himself, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup” (1 Cor. 11:28), he is not calling us to perfection but to repentance.

Yet there are times when the Church canonically prohibits or postpones Communion for the serious sinner until it is assured through the Father Confessor that the sinner has truly repented, made proper reparation where possible, and has taken the proper steps away from sin toward the new life in Christ. No person is allowed to be the judge in his own case. The Church stands with the serious sinner through the Father Confessor to help him see himself in an objective way and to provide the Lord’s counsel. Thus, any persons guilty of serious sins, i.e., murder, adultery, incest, etc., must first see their Father Confessor before they approach the chalice.

THE HOLY THINGS TO THE HOLY

Shortly before distributing Communion the priest raises the consecrated bread during the liturgy and says, “The Holy gifts for the holy (people of God).” This call to Communion clearly forbids anyone who is not holy to receive the holy gifts of God. Yet we acknowledge immediately that none is holy, but the only Holy One, God. So the choir responds immediately with the words, “One is holy, One is Lord, Jesus Christ...” Yet we come, knowing that the same act of the Holy Spirit in the *Epiclesis* prayer which has made the gifts holy has also made the people holy and united one with the other. So, we come to receive Him knowing that He has sanctified us and made us His holy people. We are not worthy, but we come to the one who alone can make us worthy.

Paul Evdokimov summarizes well what we have said on the subject of worthiness:

The Eucharist is not a reward for the “well-behaved” but food for the one who is hungry and thirsty and who knows that without this food he will die spiritually; it is the most powerful “remedy” of immortality, and antidote against eternal death, the joyful communion of love, love’s Feast.

MADE TO CONTAIN GOD

The most wonderful thing about man is that he was created to contain God. This is the miracle of miracles! Each one of us was made to be a temple of God, a golden chalice, a tabernacle of God's presence. The infinitely great God who revealed Himself in Jesus as the great God of love waits to take up residence in us. He stands at the door of our soul and knocks until we hear His voice and His knock to open and let Him come in to sup with us in the heavenly banquet (Eucharist). He will not rest until He has invaded our heart and made it His throne. Do we permit Him to take up residence within us regularly through the Eucharist, or do we turn Him away through ignorance and indifference? If we allow Him in, He will transubstantiate and change our lives into the beautiful life of Jesus. "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives in me" (Gal. 2:20).

THE ICON OF THE LAST SUPPER

Because the sacrament of the Last Supper was instituted by Jesus on Holy Thursday of Great and Holy Week, the icon of the Mystical Supper is decorated with flowers and displayed prominently on this day for veneration. Also on this day, the priest in every local Orthodox parish prepares the elements of the Eucharist that are preserved in the Holy Tabernacle on the altar for the entire year in reservation for the sick.

It is of interest that most Orthodox icons portray Jesus sitting not in the center of an oblong table but in a *circular* table, emphasizing the fact that Jesus came not to be served but to serve and to give His life for the ransom of many. He does not occupy a central position. The table is circular, and the disciples are seated around Him. At the moment when Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, one of you will hand me over” (John 13:21), the icon shows Judas reaching into a bowl of water on the table as if washing his hands of responsibility for the betrayal of Jesus. Around the table we see the other disciples in various states of sadness and concern as they face Jesus, as if asking “Lord, who is it? Is it I?”

The fact that the table is circular conveys the meaning that there is space for all at the Eucharistic table of the Lord. It is for this reason that the icon of the Last Supper is usually placed on or above the Royal Doors on the iconostasis. It shows that when we come to receive the Eucharist at the Royal Doors, we are at that moment uniting ourselves with the Lord Jesus. It is as if we are mystically present at the Last Supper when we partake of the Eucharist.

At Thy Mystical Supper, O Son of God, receive me today as a communicant.

ADDENDUM - Saint George

THE ICON OF ST. GEORGE SPEAKS TO US: ITS MESSAGE

St. George



If studied properly, each icon has a powerful story to tell. Let's take a look at a favorite icon—St. George slaying the dragon.^{[\[cxiii\]](#)} At times I like to keep this icon propped up on my desk before me. It serves as a visual reminder to me of what I am called to do in my spiritual life. I am called to confront the demonic dragons that exist in my life and to destroy them by God's grace. Dragons may be mythical, but Satan is not. Evil is real.

THE EVIL DRAGONS

What are these evil dragons? Jesus describes them as follows: “For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft, false witness, slander” (Matt. 15:19). These are some of the demonic dragons that Jesus calls on us to confront and slay each day. Paul reminds Timothy that as a “good soldier of Jesus Christ” he is to be engaged in combat against the enemy, who is personified in this icon by the dragon.

WE ARE ENLISTED IN A CONFLICT

We who have taken up Christ's cross have enlisted in a conflict—a conflict of cosmic proportions and consequences: to slay the dragons within us. This is the powerful message of the icon of St. George. Evil exists not just in the devil as typified by the dragon; evil exists not just in other people; evil exists also in us, and it needs to be resisted and overcome. When asked what is wrong with the world, G.K. Chesterton replied, “Me.” We have a special word for this struggle against evil in Orthodox spirituality: we call it *ascesis*, which means struggle—the struggle—the *agona*—to overcome sin and evil within each one of us.

OUR WEAPONS

As St. George had his weapon to slay the dragon, so St. Paul tells us, God has given us “the weapons of righteousness” to “wage war not according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but (have) the power of God to overthrow strongholds” (2 Cor. 10:3-6). What are these weapons? They are: faith, prayer, God’s word, repentance, confession, especially the Eucharist, and the Jesus Prayer, to name but a few. “Every day we do combat within our own hearts,” wrote St. Augustine. There is a crucial battle that takes place within us daily. In this battle we are called to use the God-given ‘weapons of righteousness,’ to “cleanse ourselves from all defilement of flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 7:1).

THE INNER DRAGONS

Commenting on the dragons within us, the desert monk St. Macarius (300-391) wrote:

The heart itself is but a small vessel, yet dragons are there, and there also are lions; there are poisonous beasts and all the treasures of evil. There are also rough and uneven roads; there are precipices. But there too is God; the angels, the life, the kingdom, the light, the apostles, the heavenly cities, and the treasures of grace—all things are there.

That is how the hesychast elders understood the words of Jesus, “The kingdom of God is within you” (Luke 17:21). God is within, but so are the dragons. Satan is often “the great dragon...the old serpent” (Rev. 12:9).

THE WEAPON OF ST. GEORGE: THE SPEAR

St. George had his weapon: the spear. We have ours. “Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” (Eph. 6:11). Someone has observed that in the icon of St. George, the saint grasps the spear in his hand ever so lightly to signify that the power behind the spear is really the hand of God. It is by the hand of God’s power that St. George was able to slay the evil dragon. In fact, if one looks carefully at the spear that St. George holds, one will see that there often is a horizontal line at the top of the spear that forms a cross. It is not by our power that we are able to slay the dragons that assail us; it is the power of the cross. “Be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might” (Eph. 6:10) writes St. Paul.

THE DRAGON OF ALCOHOLISM

A recovering alcoholic used the icon of St. George slaying the dragon as a spiritual aid in his struggle with alcoholism. He kept it before him as he prayed, looking upon St. George as his brother and prayer partner in Christ. Why St. George? Because he is depicted as slaying a dragon, and alcoholism was the dragon that was destroying his life and needed to be slain. Through the power of the Cross, like St. George, we become, as St. Paul writes, “more than conquerors through Him (Jesus) who loved us.”

That is the message of the icon of St. George slaying the dragon. It is an icon that speaks to us powerfully. Evil is real. Dragons are real. They exist within us. The icon calls on us to use the weapons God has given us to destroy these dragons. In many icons of St. George, the hand of the Father is extended from heaven in the upper right hand corner of the icon as a sign of blessing. Respect the dragon? Yes. Fear the dragon? No.

The feast day of St. George is celebrated on April 23.

Liberator of captives, defender of the poor, physician of the sick and champion of kings, O trophy-bearer, great martyr George, intercede to Christ our God to save our souls. Amen. —**Dismissal Hymn**

ADDENDUM - Ladder of divine ascent

***THE ICON OF THE LADDER OF DIVINE ASCENT SPEAKS: ITS
MESSAGE***

The Ladder of Divine Ascent



Billy Graham, the evangelist, was once being driven through Moldovia with an Orthodox bishop. There against the wall of an old building, he saw for the first time the icon of the Ladder of Divine Ascent. He was so impressed by the truth conveyed by this ancient icon that he mentioned it in one of his campaigns. Truly, we Orthodox Christians have two powerful gospels: one written and one visual through the powerful medium of icons.

This icon is named after a spiritual classic written by St. John of the Ladder (Climacus) who lived in the seventh century (AD 550-650) and served as abbot of the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai. His famous work entitled “The Ladder of Divine Ascent” is reminiscent of the ladder in Jacob’s dream that extended from heaven to earth. The ladder is made up of 30 steps leading toward the spiritual perfection of the reader. Each step represents one year in the life of Christ to His baptism at the age of thirty. The book offers directions to those who would follow the injunction of Jesus: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

Few books in Eastern Orthodoxy have been studied, copied, or translated more than this one. It is still read today in Orthodox monasteries during Lent. [\[cxiv\]](#)

St. John of the Ladder is celebrated in the Orthodox Church on March 30 and on the fourth Sunday of Great Lent.

JACOB'S LADDER

Since the icon of The Ladder of Divine Ascent is based on Jacob's dream of a ladder, we shall briefly review that famous dream. Most of us are acquainted with the story of Jacob's dream; how he laid himself down to sleep in the wilderness one night with a stone for a pillow and dreamed of seeing a ladder set up between heaven and earth; how he saw angels ascending and descending on the rungs of the ladder; and how God

spoke to him in that dream from the top of the ladder. And how Jacob said finally when he woke up, "Surely the LORD is in this place and I knew it not" (Genesis 28:10-17).

Jacob had committed a terrible sin. He had betrayed his brother and his father, lied, connived, and cheated. He had thus cut himself off from God. He could not on his own build a ladder by which to climb back into his broken communion with God. Yet a ladder there had to be, between God in heaven and this sinful, frail child of dust on earth. God builds the ladder in Jacob's dream and comes to him. In this dream we see God taking the initiative, making it possible for us to come to Him and for Him to come to us.

The dream was the turning point in Jacob's life. From then on Jacob was God's man. He dedicated himself to the service of the Lord. For he had seen the God who hears and answers prayer; the God who built a ladder from heaven to earth to speak to him; the God who in speaking to a sinner like Jacob had proven Himself kind and merciful beyond comprehension.

It would be many long years before Jacob's dream would come true; for the coming of Christ was many long ages in the future. But in Jacob's dream of the ladder, God promises to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, between God and man. One day the dream would come true in the flesh in the incarnation of the Son of God. See John 1:14.

THE FULFILLMENT OF JACOB'S DREAM

We leave the Old Testament, and we come now to the New Testament. We hear Jesus saying in St. John's Gospel 1:51, "Verily, verily, I say unto you, hereafter you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man." With these words Jesus recalls Jacob's dream of the ladder and tells His disciples that they are about to see the ancient dream fulfilled before their very eyes—in the Son of Man; for Christ Himself is the Ladder, linking heaven and earth.

No longer then do we need to dream of a ladder between heaven and earth whereby God might come to us and we might climb to Him. Now in Christ we have Jacob's dream come true. Because of the Incarnation of the Word of God, the great gulf is bridged. Our fellowship with God is restored. Jesus is Emmanuel, i.e., God with us. He is the Ladder. With Him and through Him, our prayers help us ascend to God.

THE ICON OF THE LADDER

There is an ancient icon of the Heavenly Ladder at the Monastery of St. Catherine at Mt. Sinai. It portrays monks climbing a ladder to heaven. Winged devils interfere to impede the ascent of some monks, dragging them down into the open mouth of hell. Christ is shown as standing in heaven at the top of the ladder, welcoming St. John Climacus who stands at the topmost rung of the ladder. Christ does not remain at the top of the ladder however. His presence is also on the ladder where He is present through prayer to every one of the climbers. On the right side of the ladder are God's angels encouraging and helping those who are ascending. We are not at the mercy of the devil. Emmanuel—God with us—is on the ladder. He is always just a prayer away from us. His strengthening presence enables us to resist the onslaughts of the evil one. In some versions of the icon St. John Climacus is pictured at the bottom of the ladder pointing people up. The angels pictured on the top (left) of the icon and the saints on the lower right serve to express the communion of saints in heaven and on earth who are praying for the climbers.

Paul Evdokimov describes the icon as follows:

The angels ascend and descend upon it. Heaven is opened and the ladder is set up at the centre of the earth, and since the ladder is Christ, it springs up in every holy place; the centres are innumerable. James of Sarug says, "Christ on the cross stands on the earth as on a many-runged ladder." Catherine of Siena sees it as a bridge between heaven and earth, like a rainbow, a living sign of the covenant. St. Ephraem says in his epiphanic hymn, "Brothers, contemplate the pillar, hidden in the air, the base of which rests on the waters and which reaches the gate of heaven like the ladder that Jacob saw."[\[cxv\]](#)

PONDERING THE ICON

Today we live in a culture that is identified as the culture of death. G.K. Chesterton said once that we all “wake up on a battlefield.” We know there is a fight going on. We see the effects of it everywhere. This icon serves to awaken us to the battle that is going on constantly within us between good and evil. One spiritual elder writes, “God lets temptations come upon those who love Him in order to teach them the art of war.” St. Peter writes, “Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil walks about like a roaring lion, seeking whom he may devour” (1 Peter 5:8). In order to survive we need to listen to the words of Jesus, “Watch and pray, lest you enter temptation. The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak” (Matt. 26:41). In order to resist the demons who are trying to knock us off the ladder, we need to *watch* and *pray* (*prosoche* and *proseuche* in Greek). Don’t for a moment think that Jesus is present only at the top of the ladder. Through prayer He and His angels are with us on every rung of the ladder as we climb. But He expects us to watch! Following are some questions to consider as we meditate on this icon:

1. Why are some climbers being knocked off the ladder by demons and some not?
2. What does this icon tell us about the Evangelical Protestant teaching of “once saved, always saved”?
3. How else, besides prayer, can Christ be present with us on the ladder as we climb?
4. If we fall off the ladder, is it possible to get back on? How?
5. For more tools that will help us stay on the ladder, we recommend to your readership the book, *Tools of Spiritual Warfare* by Joy Corey. The introduction was written by Fr. Thomas Hopko. Published by Light and Life Publishing Co. www.light-n-life.com.

ANOTHER LADDER

The image of the ladder speaks loudly and clearly to modern man. Every one of us is climbing some kind of a ladder in this age of “upward mobility.” People today spend a whole lifetime, sacrificing even family and health in order to climb a ladder—not usually the ladder of divine ascent but another ladder—the ladder of worldly success. Yet how often we come to discover in the end that all was in vain because we placed the ladder against the wrong building. The goals for which we sacrificed our all remain unfulfilled. We end up with an inner emptiness and void that is terribly painful and often leads to suicide.

THE ONLY REAL LADDER TO GOD

The only real ladder to success is the one about which Jacob dreamed in the Old Testament and which Jesus actually established through His incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension. It is the ladder that God let down to sinful Jacob in the wilderness to assure him of God's presence, His love, and forgiveness. He comes to us again and again piercing the darkness of sin and death. He descends to us to help us ascend to Him. He descends to the very door of our soul and knocks, like a beggar seeking entrance. "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and dine with him" (Rev. 3:20).

God first let this ladder down into your soul when you were baptized. It is still there. God will never remove it. So dive into your soul and start climbing this ladder one step at a time using the rungs of faith, love, hope, prayer, humility, repentance, gentleness, kindness, self-control, joy, peace, and obedience. It is truly a ladder of divine ascent, for it leads to the God of peace and glory. In patristic theology, standing still is regarded as falling. Keep climbing prayerfully.

St. Gregory of Nyssa teaches that because God is infinite, our progress toward Him is also infinite. In the words of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae, "God is not a ceiling that puts an end to our ascent."

St. John Climacus insists that not just monks but all are enjoined to climb the ladder that leads to theosis: "Indeed everyone should struggle to rise from this clay, so to speak, to a place on the throne of God" (Ladder, step 26). Theosis is not optional.

Diadochus of Photice (5th century) contrasts the difference between the image and the likeness of God in us by describing God's image in us as a simple sketch. When the colors are applied to the sketch, the likeness is brought out in all its beauty. Thus, climbing the ladder to God step by step is like growing from the image of God to His likeness. And because God has no limit, we shall continue to climb (grow) unto the likeness of God for all eternity. In the teaching of the holy Fathers, achieving the likeness of God is equivalent to deification.

NOT A LADDER OF WORTHINESS

It was not Jacob who built the ladder to God. It was God who let down the ladder from heaven and came to where sinful Jacob was. It is impossible for us to earn salvation by climbing the ladder to God and meeting Him on the topmost rung of the ladder of worthiness. The only way to get to God is for God to come to us through the incarnation and meet us as sinners on the bottommost rung of the ladder. The gospel does not begin with our erecting a ladder of reasoned argument or moral achievement and trying to climb from earth to heaven. It begins with God letting down the ladder and coming to where we are, entering our lives, casting out our devils, and destroying our death.

So God is no longer at the top of the ladder. He is with us at the bottom of the ladder; nay, He is with us on the ladder itself. There are those who look upon Christianity as an impossible ideal. They conceive of Christ as standing on top of a Mt. Everest, calling out to us to struggle and climb to where He is. But Christ does not stand at the top of the ladder of Mt. Everest calling on us to follow Him to the top. He comes down to the bottom of the ladder, to where we are, and climbs the ladder with us, step by step. There is traffic on the ladder—more than just angels ascending and descending. In the words of Fr. Dumitru Staniloae: "... not only do we ascend to communion with the Supreme Person, but that person descends to us, too. For love requires the movement of each one of those who love each other toward the other. God gives Himself to man through everything, and man to God."

THEOSIS IS NOT OBTAINED BY ONE GREAT LEAP

Dr. Constantine Cavarnos describes the meaning of the icon as follows:

Saint John's Ladder expresses the Orthodox view that spiritual perfection, theosis, salvation is not something attained all at once, as by a great leap, but comes after a long arduous process of spiritual striving, where with sustained effort one rises gradually from lower to higher and higher levels of spiritual development. Thus, in his discussion of the ninth step, Saint John remarks, "The holy virtues are like Jacob's ladder. For the virtues, leading from one to another, bear him who chooses them up to Heaven." Later, in his discussion of the fourteenth step, he observes that no one can climb a ladder in one stride. Commenting on this, Saint Symeon the new Theologian says, "Those who want to climb these steps climb the first rung of the ladder, then the second, then the third, and so on.... In this way one can rise from the earth and ascend to Heaven."[\[cxvi\]](#)

The statement on the scroll held by Saint John is taken from the concluding exhortation of the book, which begins with these words:

Ascend, ascend, brethren, ascend with eagerness and resolve in your hearts, listening to him who says, "Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord and to the house of our God, Who maketh our feet like those of the deer, and setteth us on high places, that we may be victorious with His song.

Notes

- [i] *The Mystery of Faith*. Metropolitan Hilarion. Alfeyev. SVS Press. Scarsdale, N.Y. 2002.
- [ii] *Icons: Windows on Eternity*. Gennadios Limouris. WCC Publications. Geneva, Switzerland. 1990.
- [iii] *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Vladimir Lossky. SVS Press. Crestwood, NY. 1957.
- [iv] *Festivals of the Christian Year*. John Baggley. SVS Press. Crestwood, NY. 2000.
- [v] Service Orthodoxe De Presse. No. 169 (June 1992).
- [vi] *Guide to Byzantine Iconography*. Constantine Cavarnos. IBMG Press. Belmont, MA. 2010.
- [vii] *The Meaning of Icons*. Ouspensky and Lossky. SVS Press. Crestwood, NY. 1982.
- [viii] *The Feasts of the Lord*. Hierotheos, Metrop. of Nafpaktos. Birth of the Theotokos Monastery. Levadia, Greece. 2003. Translated by Esther Williams.
- [ix] From a broadcast on French National Radio on Orthodox Easter Sunday, April 26, 1972.
- [x] *God's Path to Sanity: An Ancient Christian Alternative to Secular Psychology*. Dee Pennock. Light and Life Publ. Co. Minneapolis, MN 2010.
- [xi] *The Creed in Slow Motion*. Ronald Knox. Christian Classics. Ave Maria Press. Notre Dame, IN. 2009.
- [xii] *The Feasts of the Lord*. Metropolitan Hierotheos of Nafpaktos. Birth of Theotokos Monastery. Levadia, Greece. Translated by Esther Williams. 2003.
- [xiii] *In the World, of the Church: A Paul Evdokimov Reader*. Edited by M. Plekon. SVS Press. Crestwood, NY. 2001.
- [xiv] *Orthodoxy and Western Culture*. Edited by Patrick Henry and Valerie Hotchkiss. SVS Press. Crestwood, NY. 2005.

- [xv] *The Mystery of Faith*. SVS Press. Younkers, NY. 2011
- [xvi] *Festal Icons for the Christian Year*. John Baggle. SVS Press. Crestwood, NY. 2000.
- [xvii] *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. V. Lossky. James Clarke and Co. Ltd. Cambridge and London. 1968.
- [xviii] *The Experience of God. Vol. 1*. D. Staniloae. HCO Press. Brookline, MA. 1998.
- [xix] *Orthodoxy*. Paul Evdokimov. New City Press. Hyde Park, NY. 2011.
- [xx] *The Icon: Window on the Kingdom*. Michael Quenot. St. Vladimir's Seminary. Crestwood, NY. 1992.
- [xxi] *Real Presence: In Search of the Earliest Icons*. Sister Wendy Beckett. Orbis Books. Maryknoll, NY. 2010.
- [xxii] *Icons: Windows on Eternity*. Gennadios Limouris. WCC Publications. Geneva, Switzerland. 1990.
- [xxiii] *Windows to Heaven*. Elizabeth Zelensky and Lela Gilbert. Brazos Press. Grand Rapids, MI. 2005.
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